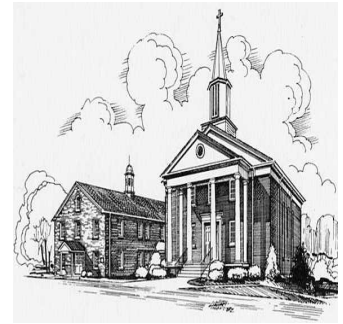


The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Second Sunday in Lent

Year C

RCL



Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

Psalms 27

Luke 13:31-35

The Collect

O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy: Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ your Son; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Genesis 15:1-12,17-18

The word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” And Abram said, “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” But the word of the LORD came to him, “This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.” He brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Then he said to him, “I am the LORD who brought

you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.” But he said, “O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?” He said to him, “Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river

Euphrates.”

Psalm 27 Page 617, BCP

Dominus illuminatio

- 1 The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom then shall I fear?
the LORD is the strength of my life;
of whom then shall I be afraid?
- 2 When evildoers came upon me to eat up my flesh,
it was they, my foes and my adversaries, who stumbled and fell.
- 3 **Though an army should encamp against me,**
yet my heart shall not be afraid;
- 4 And though war should rise up against me,
yet will I put my trust in him.
- 5 **One thing have I asked of the LORD;**
one thing I seek;
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life;
- 6 To behold the fair beauty of the LORD
and to seek him in his temple.
- 7 **For in the day of trouble he shall keep me safe in his shelter;**
he shall hide me in the secrecy of his dwelling
and set me high upon a rock.

Luke 13:31-35

Some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” He said to them, “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’ Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

SERMON

I was driving to a speaking engagement once when I noticed a tailgater behind me. I mean RIGHT behind me. If I stopped abruptly, we were going to have an opportunity to discuss insurance policies. The driver followed me all the way to the college where I was to speak. I got out of the car and avoided looking at her. I didn't want to start a fight. We made it safely. That's all that mattered, I thought. Then I became aware that she was right behind me again, tailgating while we walked!

"You're the tailgater!" I said as I turned to her.

"Yes", she confessed. "I don't know why I do that."

I couldn't resist saying, "Well, if you don't know, is there someone else we should ask?"

Very often, I'm afraid that her answer is the answer we might give to someone inquiring why we do the things we do in worship. "I don't know why I do that."

We received our religious instruction at a young age, incorporated it into our lives, then...feel sort of naughty if we think about it any more or vary from what was taught us, referring any questions to the minister. It's as if we think that what we were taught as children uniquely and completely defined God, and that to vary from it would be apostasy.

On the one hand, that's a good thing. The teachings of the church are like the tail of a kite. They provides drag which keeps people from going completely off the rails. On the other hand, the Holy Spirit, which speaks to each of us, is the wind which lifts us free. Take away either the Breath of God or the teachings of the church, and all you will have left is Charlie Brown and a wrecked kite in the kite-eating tree. If we stubbornly cling to the teachings of our youth, without opening our more mature, adult souls to the Breath of God, we'll

walk past the suffering of our brothers and sisters on our way to raise funds for a trip to Turkey to locate Noah's Ark, then marvel that in a country as rich as this one people still live in want.

For most of us, the religious instruction we received as children was all about heaven and hell, reward and punishment. Is that really all there is to the faith we embrace or can the Breath of God raise us beyond that early instruction? Someone posted a paragraph on Facebook this week which recounted a dispute in heaven.

Saint Peter and the Angel Gabriel had a problem. Peter was sorting people at the Pearly Gates letting some in and keeping others out, but Gabriel was finding more people in heaven than Peter was letting in. They were befuddled. Gabriel told Peter to keep working and he'd get to the bottom of this. A few hours later he came back and told Peter not to worry; he'd figured it out. "It's Jesus. He's pulling people in over the wall."

Peter and Gabriel represent that early religious training we received. One becomes a Christian because that's how you avoid hell and get to go to heaven, which sounds pretty boring with all those harps, but it's still better than the alternative. Peter's job is to enforce God's justice at the pearly gates. It's all about heaven and hell, in the end.

In this story, though, Jesus seems to be kicking the rules around quite a bit. What does your early religious training tell you about this story? Doesn't it offend your sense of justice, just a bit? If Peter has the keys to the Kingdom, to determine who gets in and who doesn't, doesn't this whole story fly in the face of the perfectly clear and obvious need for evil to be punished? What are we? Universalists? If there are no consequences to bad behavior, what's to keep people from doing just anything that comes into their heads? If civilized beha-

behavior isn't defended by fear and terror, there just won't be any civilized behavior.

Or will there? Frankly, I don't know. I'd hope that we are held together in a co-operative society by something more positive and life-affirming than fear. The majority of people I deal with around here seem to hold doors open for others because it gives them a little kick to do something nice for someone else rather than out of fear of punishment.

On the other hand, I can easily imagine people who do bad things just because. I even knew one, once. His name is Jimmy Haley, and his stated goal, once he broke out of the prison where I had put him, was to kill me and my family. Kathy and Kat and I had to move to a safe house, then eventually to leave town to give the police a chance to catch him. We went to Detroit, of all places, to be safe, which kind of tells you something,

right there. So, yeah, I can easily imagine people who do bad things for bad reasons, and I understand the desire to see God as the Great Score Settler in the Sky. But I wonder...is score settling the same thing as justice? Must justice always be about destruction, pain and punishment, score-settling and the casting out of evil-doers? Is it possible for justice to be about reformation, salvation, correction and pulling people in over the walls? Could it be that it isn't really all about heaven and hell after all?

If we think closely about God as the Great Score Settler in the Sky, and compare that image with the texts we read for today, how good is the fit? I admit it's a little hard to see, looking back at 5,000 years of history into a culture radically different than our own, but if we take a minute to study what has been written, we can understand it well enough. Abram (he's not yet Ab-

raham, remember) is afraid and defeated by his life. In a vision, God speaks to him.

“Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.”

He’s an old childless man and he’s frightened of the future. With no heir, he and the memory of him will disappear amid the sands of time. It is torment for him to think that after all he has been through he will be forgotten. God comforts his fears in the way we might comfort a child afraid of the dark, telling him, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” God goes on to tell him something remarkable. God reassured him:

“... no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.” He brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.”

I think you have to be struck by the tenderness of

this exchange. Abram, the old man facing his end with no heir, no child, is being comforted by God. God Himself is his shield! That's all well and good, but Abram is aware of the realities of the thing, and though he believes what God has told him, and though his belief is counted to him as righteousness, he's got questions. "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" I think that's a pretty reasonable question, given the facts. But God's response is pretty obscure to our modern minds.

He [God] said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two.

Why in the world would God and Abram embark upon this sort of eccentric behavior, cutting animals in

two? It is only odd to us because we don't make contracts this way anymore, but that is just what this was — the making of a contract. This ritual was called “cutting a covenant”, and it is deeply disturbing to those things you were taught as a youth about God as the uninvolved arbiter in the sky, the dispenser of heaven and hell.

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.”

The ritual of cutting a covenant was a promise acted out in ritual, usually between two leaders. The promise being sealed by this ritual might be expressed as, “If my

words to you prove false, may I be cut in half before your eyes.”

Think of that! The Lord, the Creator of the Universe, is pledging His very existence to Abram as a seal and a sign that His promise to Abram will come to pass. Even more astonishing, it is God who passed between the split animals. Abram did not. The consequences of a failure of the covenant are being willingly borne by God Himself!

It's very hard for me to square this sort of thing with the idea of the God as the Reservoir of Revenge in the Sky. This is an act of such love, such compassion, such a parently act, for want of a better word, that I'm at a loss how to incorporate it within the image of God as the ultimate Vessel of Vengeance. It makes me think that Peter and Gabriel's idea of God's intention that the sheep and the goats, the good and the bad, shall be sep-

arated isn't at all accurate. It makes me think that the image of God as parent, God lifting us over the walls that separate us from our true path, is the more accurate.

This act of familial affection and self-denying love, if such a term can be applied to God, prepares me for Jesus' words in the Gospel text.

Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem. Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

Could you not see that coming from the image of God Himself pledging that if His words be found mendacious, if His comfort be found false, may He be cut in twain? It's the image of a mother telling her child that

she'd throw herself in front of a train to save her child. It's the image of a father working a second job so that his kids can have what they need to survive and thrive. It's the image of the volunteer at The Neighborhood donating time and heart to clothe and feed strangers.

Last Sunday and the Sunday before, I told you that the story of Jesus must be read back to front. Nothing “happened” to Jesus as we understand story telling. Jesus came for one purpose, to die and be resurrected, to bring the new covenant in his very flesh and blood, and he did that. I'm not surprised that when we look at that sacrifice we turn to our brothers and sisters, our children and the children of others and try to do likewise.

The religion you were taught as a child was all about heaven and hell. The teaching of the church was offered to you in those terms so that you could begin to understand the importance of listening for God. Now

you are grown. Now you must listen for the stirring of the Holy spirit in the kite of your soul. You must submit to its power to lift you over the wall of your own inadequacies to acts of loving kindness you did not think yourself capable of. Fly high, church.

AMEN

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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