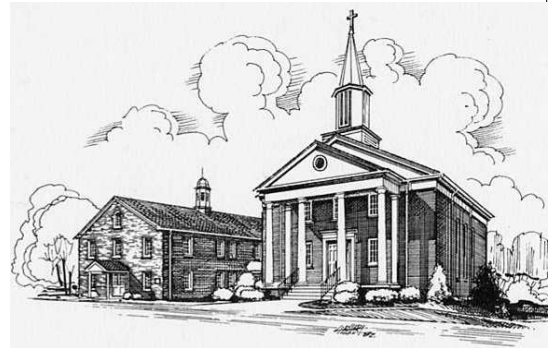


**The Lessons Appointed for Use  
on the  
Second Sunday in Lent**



Year C  
RCL

Genesis 15:1-12,17-18  
Psalm 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

*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.

- 8 Even now he lifts up my head \*  
above my enemies round about me.
- 9 Therefore I will offer in his dwelling an oblation  
with sounds of great gladness; \*  
I will sing and make music to the LORD.
- 10 Hearken to my voice, O LORD, when I call; \*  
have mercy on me and answer me.
- 11 You speak in my heart and say, "Seek my face." \*  
Your face, LORD, will I seek.
- 12 Hide not your face from me, \*  
nor turn away your servant in displeasure.
- 13 You have been my helper;  
cast me not away; \*  
do not forsake me, O God of my salvation.
- 14 Though my father and my mother forsake me, \*  
the LORD will sustain me.
- 15 Show me your way, O LORD; \*  
lead me on a level path, because of my enemies.
- 16 Deliver me not into the hand of my adversaries, \*  
for false witnesses have risen up against me,  
and also those who speak malice.
- 17 What if I had not believed  
that I should see the goodness of the LORD \*  
in the land of the living!
- 18 O tarry and await the LORD's pleasure;  
be strong, and he shall comfort your heart; \*

wait patiently for the LORD.

**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

One of my least favorite experiences in law school was Professor Hamm's contracts class. Professor Hamm was a grandfatherly sort who had taught contracts since Noah's flood. So familiar with his subject was he that he gave the same lecture on the same day of each semester he taught. This provided upperclassmen an economic opportunity, always welcome among students. The upperclassmen sold their notes, called "Hamm-o-grams", to the incoming class allowing them to skip some of the more tedious lectures.

From my collection of Hamm-o-grams I learned that a contract is an agreement between two or more parties, supported by consideration and is binding on both, or it's not a contract. If you and I agree that I will give you ten bucks, that's not a contract; it's a gift. In legal terms, it's "not supported by consideration". It obligates one party, but not the other. Now, if you and I agree that I will gladly pay you on Tuesday for a hamburger today, we have a contract. Both parties have



agreed to something and both are bound by the terms of the contract.

In the ancient world, contracts were bloodier affairs than Professor Hamm's lectures anticipated. The sort we will speak of here were called blood covenants and the making of a blood covenant was called *kārat berît*, which literally means to "cut a covenant", a phrase still with us when we speak of "cutting a deal". Just as we read, animals were slaughtered and cut in half. Then the parties to the covenant walked together between the slaughtered animals so to say, "May this be done to me if I do not keep my oath." Each party was literally pledging his life to the faithful keeping of the agreement. What in the world does this mean when one party to the Covenant is God Himself? God is eternal and can no more break a covenant than He can die. Even more astonishing, our text tells us that after Abram had slaughtered the animals and arranged them, watching over them and driving off the birds of prey,

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.

Wait a minute! A contract must bind both the parties. In ancient practice, the parties must walk between the slaughtered animals together to “seal the deal”, binding both to their mutual promises, but Abram is out like a light! He doesn’t walk between the slaughtered animals! He doesn’t confirm, “May this be done to me if I do not keep my oath.” Abram has, in fact, made no oath, nor pledged his life to guarantee his faithful performance of his oath! It is God, only, who is binding himself to Abram and his descendants.

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.”

I can hear Professor Hamm objecting as sweat broke out on his pink bald head, “There is no mutuality of agreement! Only one party is bound! It is unsupported by consideration!

This is no contract! At most it is...a gift.”

And so it is. God’s covenant with Abram is, and remains, a gift, a gift to His people. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews notes:

When God made a promise to Abraham, because he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, “I will surely bless you and multiply you.” And thus Abraham, having patiently endured, obtained the promise. Human beings, of course, swear by someone greater than themselves, and an oath given as confirmation puts an end to all dispute. In the same way, when God desired to show even more clearly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it by an oath, so that through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God would prove false, we who have taken refuge might be strongly encouraged to seize the hope set before us.<sup>1</sup>

God can neither die nor violate His oath which forms “The unchangeable character of his purpose.” To encourage us to seize the hope set before us, God Himself put it into terms that humans could understand, binding Himself with His pledge, “May this be done to me if I do not keep my oath”, as

<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 6:13-18 NRSV

if such a thing were possible. It is impossible that God would prove false, but so anxious was He that humanity seize the hope set before them that He did even this!

What is this hope which is so important that God Himself would cut a covenant to assure our confidence in it? Is it all about heaven when we die? Well, yes, in part, but there is an important element of this hope in the here-and-now. God has given His people the land on which to live, and, by extension, the life with which to enjoy it. God is affirming that His promises are the scaffolding upon which life here is built, and guaranteeing that the scaffolding is secure. He is saying that if we will but listen, we can live lives within His promises, secure and fulfilled. Generally speaking, we don't listen, and the result is lives driven by fear and filled with violence.

Luke builds on this idea that God's promises are inviolable.

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!

Jesus has a task, a Godly task, preordained for him to fulfill and no one, not even Herod, can change that. Jesus' task must be performed as God wills, and where God wills. However badly we accomplish our designated tasks, the same is true of us. Acknowledging this truth is why we prayed today:

**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,**

God's unilateral cutting of a covenant is the here-and-now reflection of God's mercy. It is the essence of the hope we are being offered.

AMEN

## BENEDICTION

Fr. Richard Rohr once wrote, “Christianity is a lifestyle – a way of being in the world that is simple, non-violent, shared, and loving. However, we made it into an established “religion” (and all that goes with that) and avoided the lifestyle change itself. One could be warlike, greedy, racist, selfish, and vain in most of Christian history, and still believe that Jesus is one’s ‘personal Lord and Savior’ ... the world has no time for such silliness anymore. The suffering on Earth is too great.”

God’s promise is that God’s way is the only hope of life.

Live in that hope, church.

The Lord bless you and keep you;  
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;  
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

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

---

The Bible texts of the Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel lessons are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible,

copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Church of Christ in the USA, and used by permission.

The Collects, Psalms and Canticles are from the Book of Common Prayer, 1979.

Sermon Copyright 2018 J. Stewart Schneider