

Sermon, 4 March—Second Sunday in Lent

Genesis 15:1-18; Psalm 27; Philippians 3:17—4:1; Luke 13:22-35

Both Advent and Lent are introspective seasons in the Church Year. They are periods of time in which we consider how far we have come, how much we have changed, what yet remains in us to do, what we long for, and whether or not our life supports our hope. While in Advent, we think of ourselves as watching and waiting, in Lent we consider that we are on a journey through wilderness, as Jesus was for forty days, and as the People of Israel were for forty years. In today's lessons, we observe Abram and Jesus reflecting on the course of their own sojourn. Both men consider where they are and what still lies ahead of them.

The episode we heard from Genesis occurs early in the story of Abram, later to be called Abraham. Up to this point, Abram has been prompt following God's call, journeying into unknown lands. In this episode, however, he raises, not objections exactly, but doubts. Abram knows whatever the reward God offers him is trivial if it ends with his life: "what will you give me?" he asks, anxious that he has no offspring. Abram is even more blunt when God tells him that he has been brought out of Ur to possess the land in which his tents are presently pitched: "how will I know that I am to possess it?" he asks. God's two pledges in answer to Abram are quite distinct, and hint to us of the ways in which the Spirit speaks to us and quickens conviction and faith in us. In Abram's two reactions we have two contrasting ways that souls engage God.

First, God takes Abram outside and shows him the stars; if he can count them, he will be able to count his descendants. At that, Abram, we are told, "believed the LORD." That is a seminal verse in Scripture; Paul was not the only one to develop a theology around the power of faith to obtain

righteousness. But this morning, let's look at something simpler. In Abram's first response, we see an expansive burst of affirmation typical of what William James calls the healthy soul. The soaring beauty of nature, the caravan of the heavens, the procession of stars, awaken in Abram assent and trust. When we come to realize that this is where we reside, surrounded by this power and wonder, something in us consents and opens and affirms. Notice that we are not told that Abram believes this tally of his descendants; he believes "the LORD." It is not the statement, but the person making that statement, that receives Abram's assent. What Abram relaxes into is the hands of God. He lets himself go into what the Creator of the stars is about.

All of us, I believe, have known this intruding tide. It can be as simple as noticing the beauty of the snow and receiving that beauty as a gift. Why do we feel good when we can be in touch with nature? Why were we made sensitive to such things? But the evidence is that, when we are open to them, when we let them touch us, something in us slips back into its proper place and returns to quietly generating peace and hope in us. This happens not only in nature. On occasion God gives us the grace to look around the supper table and realize that this *is* the life we want, and that it is already full of encouragement and comfort and love. In these moments of mute thanksgiving, we can notice, if we glance inwardly, that we "believe the LORD," the creator and preserver and giver of all good things, and that this trust, and its accompanying gratitude, can be valued at righteousness.

God's second pledge to Abram is of a very different order. God asks for five animals, and Abram gives them to God by slaughtering them, cutting them in half, and protecting them by driving off the encroachment of carrion-eating birds. He is there until sunset, when he sinks into a deep deathlike sleep, and darkness and terror descend on him. In other words, he

has a nightmare; and in that nightmare, he sees God pass between the pieces of the animals in the form of a smoking brazier and a blazing torch, smoke and fire being the way God would descend on Mount Sinai. Doing this, God enacts the solemn and fearful ceremony of “cutting a covenant,” by which the persons entering into covenant with each other would each walk between pieces of sacrificed animals as a sign that they would take on themselves the same fate of dismemberment if they were to break their oath. But here, in this moment, the universe tilts and cracks: God pledges himself to a human being, God submits to a barbarous ritual, and God alone calls on Himself alone the binding doom—as God would do in Christ. Abram, sweating in his sleep, has only to accept what God does, has only to receive it.

This, of course, is the other mode of spiritual engagement: the blood-drenched horrors of what William James calls the sick soul, for whom belief is bought by suffering. Not all move through life in grateful affirmations. Some find acts of faith costly, painful, frightening, and are brought to them only at the extremities of life. For them, these images of mutilation seem matters of spiritual fact, as if we were kin to those animals that chew off a foot to escape a trap. These are the people for whom faith, if it is to have power at all, must be about the power to pass through death and brokenness and blood and darkness.

But the wonder of this story is that Abram is asleep when the contract is completed. It is God’s work, not ours, that accomplishes the new life in the sick soul. The sick soul is not heroic: it does not overcome, but survives. All Abram does is prepare, killing what must be killed, driving off predators gluttonous for death, and finally enduring the terror of holding on while the power of God passes through the pieces he has assembled.

Perhaps all of us also know these sinkholes in our soul that open up in us, where it becomes apparent to us that we can do nothing more on our own. Our bondage in Egypt can become the occasion of God's mighty acts. There are many people who have first sensed God pledged to them as they went through illness, divorce, addiction, loss of livelihood, natural disasters, social catastrophes, and death. Why it should be so, only God knows. How our brokenness becomes thanksgiving, God alone comprehends.

Even though these two modes appear so different, they share the ability to notice God's presence and to respond to it in faith. Whether one is delighted by beauty and moved by creativity or rendered by pain and confined by fear, what makes the difference between a shallow reactivity and a steady responsiveness is the development of that peripheral vision that enables us to glimpse God striding next to us. That sense of peripheral vision—I do not know how better to describe it—can be strengthened by prayer. In prayer, we place what we care about in God's hands and then remain attentive to what happens to it then and as we rise and go about our work. In prayer, we hold what troubles or delights us in God's presence and then listen to the silence that wraps itself around it. In prayer, we offer back to God, with detailed appreciation, what we are most grateful for and then observe how we are shown to care for it better in our life. In prayer, the healthy soul, who thrives on optimism, can come to stop looking away in the presence of pain; and in prayer, the sick soul, who sinks into depression, can find how to give thanks and rest.

All of this, it seems to me, informs Jesus' own introspection, and we see it there bear fruit in him in ways our prayer might bear fruit in us. The faith that in Abram we saw as a struggle and an arrival, in Jesus we see as steady possession. He knows what work he still has to complete: healing

and casting out demons. He knows also the inevitable trajectory of his life: towards Jerusalem. He understands why he must go to Jerusalem: prophets must give their entire life to their message, and that can only most worthily be done in the most holy of places. Our answers will be different, but we also need to know what work is essentially ours to complete, we also need to know the destined direction of our life, and we also need to know what business we have in the Temple in Jerusalem, that is, what our ultimate affirmation of our relationship with God will be. Some of that will unfold in front of us as widely and easily as the starry skies, and we will embrace it. Some of that we must cut ourselves in half in order to discover, and we will endure it. But in either case, we will lose both options if fail to ask where God's hand might be at work in us.

Both Abram and Jesus found themselves where we also find ourselves. Abram had only recently arrived in the land of Canaan. Jesus was on his journey to Jerusalem. They were in the midst of the course of their life. Whatever meaning their life and their decisions had was yet to be revealed. That is true for us as well, and in Lent we have opportunity to be conscious of it. Our challenge is to use our life to express our faith that God's promises are good, as Abram did, and that our life can be aimed at the fulfillment of those promises, as Jesus did. May we walk with them on this journey, until our arrival in that Heavenly Jerusalem, where we hope to praise God with all the saints, as we do this day.