

Lent 2 – Year C

The clue for our focus in today’s readings is in our opening collect: “Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways...” There are other ideas one can find linking these readings today, and I listened to and read many reflections on those. But when I sat again with the Scriptures, and *then* looked again at the collect – it almost leapt out at me. Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways...

Every year in the three-year cycle of readings from the Revised Common Lectionary, on the Second Sunday of Lent, we hear some portion of the story of Abraham and Sarah. It’s as if we’re taken back to our faith roots. This morning, when we pick up the story, God has already promised Abram that he would be the father of many nations. Abram is already wealthy. So when God says to Abram, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” – Abram’s response is: Oh yeah? Well...what reward is that going to be? I have everything I need and more besides – but I don’t have any offspring...and it’s getting a bit late. Abram is on the verge, it seems, of either forgetting the promise God made to him before, or of letting go of any hope of it coming true. Abram is on the verge, if you will, of going astray from the promise of God’s way. So God takes him outside, shows him a sky full of stars, and *reminds* him of that earlier promise. See more stars than you can count? So shall your descendants be... God reminds Abram of who he is – someone to whom God has promised to give descendants and land to be their own. And these are the two great indicators in that day of the assurance of living on...

Then we’re told the Abram believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness. Still Abram protests somewhat: How will I know that I am to possess the land? How will I know that You are going to fulfill your promise? It is then that God makes a covenant with Abram. In those days, it was custom to seal a promise by splitting animals in two, with the party making the promise walking between the two halves – thereby saying in action, “If I fail to carry out my promise, let me be split in two as these animals have been.” And so, God instructs Abram to prepare for this covenant making – and Abram does, protecting those elements from being taken away by birds – and then we are told that a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness. This is that darkness that greets all of us, I think, before moments of tremendous import – before we make deep and momentous commitments – darkness in which we have to admit that we have no idea what we are getting into but are still compelled and committed to go forward. And it is in that darkness that God – under the guise of the smoking fire pot and flaming torch – passes between the pieces Abram had laid out – and makes God’s covenant with Abram.

This is not a contract, a deal. It is a *covenant*. God has taken it beyond promising Abram a great reward. God and Abram have entered into *covenantal relationship*. “Be gracious, O God, 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.*”

In last Sunday’s gospel, we heard the three temptations in the desert – each of which was a temptation for Jesus to be something other than the Love of God made flesh. If you are the son of God, then you should be filled with bread when you’re hungry! You should use your power to satisfy yourself! If you are the son of God, you should rule the world with power! If you are the Son of God, make God prove it. But Jesus resists those temptations, and emerges from the desert filled with the Spirit, the life of God – which he then reveals as he heals the sick and casts out demons, as he carries out the mission he found in the prophet Isaiah, to preach good news to the poor, proclaim liberty to captives, restore sight to the blind.

I would posit that what we have in today’s gospel is a *fourth* temptation – to walk away, to save himself, to “go astray from God’s way,” to use the words from our collect. Some Pharisees come to Jesus and say, “You need to get out of here, because Herod is out to kill you.” You are upsetting the order of things. You are turning things upside down, with your proclamations by your words and your life that God loves the poor and the outcast and the sinner. You are criticizing the powers that be, breaking the rules, and Herod won’t stand for it. – So save yourself, and go away.

And Jesus counters... Go tell that fox... 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow...' Today and tomorrow, every day, I am going to continue to live out the mission, to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, to announce God’s favor. - No, I will not yield to the temptation to walk away. I will not stray from the way of God – the kingdom of God.

In the letter to the Philippians, Paul, too, is cautioning those early Christians, and us, not to be led astray by “enemies of the cross of Christ.” Rather, he urges them – and us – to “stand firm in the Lord in this way” – this way *of the cross* – this way of God.

That way of the cross – the way of God – the Way of Jesus – is to continue to preach the good news of God in Christ. It is to continue, with Abraham, to believe in God’s promise – and to be in covenant, in relationship with God. It is to continue to reject the temptations of power and control and selfishness and to embrace the all-inclusive, unconditional love that is God, even when – and perhaps especially when – that conflicts with the powers that be.

We cannot be silent in the face of hatred when it raises its head – in New Zealand or Selma, in mosques or churches or city streets. We cannot walk away from conflict, but we can meet it with love. The movie, *Selma*, which we have the chance to see together this afternoon, may give us some insight on how to do that.

We prayed earlier with the psalmist:

What if I had not believed
that I should see the goodness of the LORD *
in the land of the living!

What if I had not believed? What if I had gone astray? - We all *have*, at various moments. We all have yielded to the temptations to be someone other than the person God created us to be, we have all lived as though we were not filled with the spirit, the life of God. Lent is our opportunity to acknowledge that, and to choose – again and again – to believe, and with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of God’s Word, Jesus Christ.

May it be so.

- [Genesis 15:1-12,17-18](#)
- [Philippians 3:17-4:1](#)
- [Luke 13:31-35](#)
- [Psalm 27](#)