

Lent 2C 2022 Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18 & Luke 13:31-35

Confession: Lent is not my favorite season. It's not the liturgy in a minor key; I kind of like that. It's not the overall somber tone of the season; I have a strong melancholic streak, so I don't mind that. It's not the additional prayer and extra worship, or the austerity and fasting, or giving extra money to charity. The struggle that I find in Lenten discipline is how not to make this merely a season of will-powered motivational self-improvement—like New Year's resolutions 2.0. It is a temptation in itself to re-baptize whatever is culturally popular—fad diets, exercise routines, daily checklists—as spiritual practices, to make this a season where we assign ourselves more to do mostly for the sake of doing more. A more focused and intense routine can work for us in many areas of life: studying for an exam, practicing for a performance, training for a race, meeting a deadline. But considering that the Spirit moves where She chooses, applying efficiency methods to our spirituality and expecting measurable results is probably a recipe for disappointment. Sometimes we're not called to *do* so much as we're called to trust in God who has promised to do all things for us.

When the Lord speaks to Abram in our reading from Genesis for today, it's not their first conversation. God has already promised Abram, a couple of times, a family and a land in which to settle. However, Abram's preferred timeline and God's timeline did not match up, so Abram argues with the Lord. That's not a bad thing, by the way; all throughout scripture we hear people lament, openly and honestly expressing their disappointment, impatience, and frustration with God, particularly when there's a promise hanging out there waiting to be fulfilled. Far from punishing Abram for his complaint, the Lord re-asserts the promise: *Look toward heaven and count the stars; so shall your descendants be...I give you this land to possess.*

We might wonder how Abram can be in frequent conversation with God yet still have questions, but he does. He was, after all, far beyond the normal age for fatherhood; the land he was to inherit was already inhabited by other people. So maybe it's not entirely out of line for him to ask about the logistics. I wonder if Abram was expecting God to lay out a ten step plan, to plot the next events on a timeline, to assign some tasks, and to name benchmarks by which Abram could track his progress. If I'm being honest, that would be what I would have wanted. If I'm being honest, that's still how I wish God would operate—tell me what I can *do* to get the ball rolling; tell me specifics so I can see where this kingdom of God stuff is happening.

God does exactly the opposite. God gives Abram no details about how these major life events are going to be accomplished, only a more spectacular symbol of the promise that they

will be. Ancient Mid-Easterners used the idiom to “cut” a covenant—it’s the origin of our own saying to “cut a deal.” So God instructs Abram to gather animals for sacrifice and to cut them in half—the symbolism being that going back on one’s word to violate a promise should be impossible, just as it would be impossible to restore to wholeness the sacrifices that had been cut in two. But notice that when the Lord makes this covenant, it is while Abram is in a deep sleep. The covenant to which God will be faithful is so much God’s doing, as opposed to Abram’s doing, that Abram isn’t even awake when God makes the promise.

If you know the rest of the story, you know this fiery nighttime display is still not the successful object lesson that the Lord may have hoped Abram would learn. Abram and Sarai still get impatient waiting for the Lord to act and still insist on taking matters into their own hands. Sarai still laughs at God’s promise and forces her slave to bear Abram’s first child, then becomes jealous and orders the rift through which Ishmael and Isaac become fathers of rival nations. Yet even for all their continued meddling and muddling, God faithfully keeps God’s promise, just as God had always intended.

More often than God calls us to extraordinary acts of heroism, God calls us to the humble act of trust—trust that God, who has promised us abundant life, will fulfill that promise—and do it without us resorting to less-than-godly methods to try to make it happen for ourselves. Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem was not that the people refused to do some mighty act. He despaired that they wouldn’t let God teach them, lead them, and care for them, as God tried again and again to do: *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!* Would that we would simply trust what God is trying to do with us and for us and through us for the sake of the kingdom.

I am not going to argue with centuries of church tradition and say that our Lenten disciplines, in whatever way we may engage them, may not be healthy and helpful, edifying and enriching to our spirit. But they are not substitutes for, nor even additions to, the gift of love which God gives to us, a gift which we don’t need to—and in fact can’t—*do* anything to earn. Thanks be to God whose steadfast lovingkindness endures forever and who keeps every promise, not because of what we do, but because of who God is.