

I am excited for our St. Patrick's celebration today, which combines two of my favorite things: potatoes and board games. If, when you think of board games, you think of excruciating three hour rounds of Monopoly, you should know that the gaming industry has come a long way in the last several years, giving us hundreds of new options. A few of those are cooperative games, where the players work together on a common goal, but most are traditional competitive games that fall somewhere on the spectrum between each player just trying to get to the end of the board first, like in Candyland or Chutes and Ladders, to games where the whole point is to take out other players, like in Chess or Risk. In the middle are games where a player can choose how antagonistic a strategy they want to use, from focusing mostly on completing their own goal to more aggressively inconveniencing, blocking, or outright attacking other players. I believe in board game karma, so in those strategy games, I tend not to be the first to go on the offensive; but I have one friend who reliably uses her turns to block or attack others even at the expense of making progress of her own. I wouldn't call myself overly competitive, and I don't think anyone would call me a sore loser, but it is easier for me to accept defeat in those games that *require* players to attack than in the games where players can *choose* whether or not to be aggressive. Human beings are sensitive to betrayal: it's one thing to be attacked by an enemy or adversary, but it's something else entirely to be attacked by a trusted friend or ally. One of the overarching themes of scripture is humanity's struggle to trust God, that is to believe that God is trustworthy, that God will not betray us or pull the cosmic rug out from under us. So in scripture God is repeatedly described by the Hebrew word *hesed*, which in English is something like *steadfast loving kindness*—the characteristic whereby God remains faithful to the promises God makes, even when we human beings don't live up to our end of the bargain.

In Israel's origin story, God calls Abram to leave his homeland and most of his extended family to take up residence in a new promised land where he is to become the patriarch of a great nation. Abram and his wife Sarai are far beyond the age of parenthood when they start traveling to this already occupied region, and they are not by any metric patient people. Although God several times repeats the promise of land and offspring, when God does not deliver according Abram's preferred timeline, Abram whines to God: *I still don't have any children, so a slave is going to inherit all my stuff*. God assures Abram that this is not the case; Abram will have a son, and in fact will have as many descendants as there are stars in the sky. Though, at Abram and Sarai's age, this is probably the more outlandish promise, Abram believes the Lord. Then God reminds Abram that he will possess this land, and remarkably, Abram whines again: *O Lord God, how do I know that I shall possess it?* Because apparently God's word is not enough for Abram.

So God sends Abram to collect sacrificial animals as a sign of the covenant God makes with him. In the ancient world, they would *cut* a covenant; that's where we get our idiom *to cut a deal*. When two parties came to an agreement, they would cut a symbol in two, as if to say that just as the pieces couldn't be put back together, the covenant couldn't be undone—or if it was, the same should happen to the one who broke his word as happened to the severed animals. But in this vision, when the flame passes between the pieces and God speaks the terms of the covenant, Abram is in a deep sleep. So not only does the covenant not depend on Abram, he's not even awake when God makes the promise. We so often speak of faith as something human beings have or do, but in the case of the man who is credited as the father of the faith, *God* is the one who is 100% faithful; Abram is merely a beneficiary.

The rest of the story shows that God remains faithful to this covenant, even when Abram and Sarai prove faithless. Abram lies a couple of times because he thinks his life is in danger, even though these promises hadn't yet come to fruition. Sarai laughs at God's promise, then lies about laughing. She forces her maid Hagar to have Abram's first child and then exiles Hagar and Ishmael after she has Isaac, the child God always intended to fulfill the covenant. Abram and Sarai keep going rogue to try to enact this covenant on their own terms, but the steadfast loving kindness of the Lord never ceases; when God makes a promise, God keeps that promise. God doesn't need us to take moral short cuts, make ethical compromises, or employ evil in pursuit of what God has promised. When we lie or cheat or bend the rules, when do what we know is wrong because *everyone does it* or *that's just the way the real world works* or *the ends justify the means*, what we're really saying is that we don't believe God's way will work, that we don't trust God to be faithful to us; we're really saying that we trust ourselves more than we trust God.

Fast forward a couple thousand years to today's gospel: some of the Pharisees try to help Jesus by warning him to escape Herod. But Jesus hasn't yet finished the work he came to do. God will fulfill the covenant that God makes with humanity through the incarnation; neither Herod nor anyone else has the power to prevent God from keeping God's promises. Jesus assures them that he's working on his timetable, not theirs, not Herod's. If you've been fasting this Lent, by now you might be feeling the twinge of temptation toward whatever you've been forgoing—that little voice that tells you maybe you *can't* live without whatever. But the point of a Lenten discipline is to remind us *not* to rely on our own willpower but to trust the strength and the steadfast loving kindness of the Lord, without hedging our bets. We have a problem with faithfulness; we humans betray each other, God, even ourselves. Yet God remains faithful to us, not because of what we do, but because of who God is. Thanks be to the One whom we can always trust, even and especially when we can't trust ourselves.