

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent

**Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Psalm 27; Luke 13:31-35; Phil. 3:17—4:1.**

**Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18** seems a strange passage. It tells of Abram and God quarrelling over the patriarch's inability to sire a son and thus pass on his lineage. God commands Abram to "bring a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon" (15:9), to cut them apart lengthwise, and then to lay on the ground each pair of the two halves opposite one another with a path between them. The text then tells us that, when the sun had gone down, "a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces" and God promised to Abram that he would indeed give him a son. Through that son, the entire land of Palestine would be given to Abram's descendants.

This story sounds strange to our 21<sup>st</sup> century ears, for it is describing a cultic practice we neither understand nor appreciate. What was going on here? And what does it have to do with God's fulfillment of God's promise of a son for Abram?

To truly understand this passage, we must start several chapters earlier. Genesis 12:1-4 tells the reader that Abram lived in Haran, a region in central Mesopotamia. There he received a call from God. That confrontation that God had with Abram in Haran established the pattern of confrontation used throughout the Hebrew Bible: God directly meeting a person with a specific message, commissioning that person to become God's ambassador with that message, and giving support to that person to carry out that message.

God's message to Abram was specific. God promised Abram that he would be the father of a great nation through whom God would bless all humankind. That nation would be God's means by which all people would find shalom, joy and ultimate meaning in life – "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3) because of Abram.

But if Abram was to become such a blessing to humankind, he had to meet certain conditions. He had to separate himself from his home and from his larger family, leave his beloved Haran, and travel to the land of Canaan. He had to leave the moon gods of Haran and go to Canaan where the "God-who-had-no-name" dwelt (the name "Yahweh:" would be given to this mysterious God about 800 years later in the story of Moses and the Burning Bush). Since the ancients believed that a god had power only within a given territory, Abram could only receive God's promise by leaving Haran (where the moon god reigned supreme) and travel to Canaan where the "God-who-had-no-name" dwelt.

What deep faith Abram displayed! He had to give up his home and most of his extended family. He had to give up his city. And he even had to give up his gods and journey to a strange land where lived a new God, a God whom he had never known nor worshiped. And he did this simply in order to "be a blessing (so that) all the families of the earth will be blessed". In Abram's faith, therefore, the Hebrew people could see the kind of faith all Israel was meant to have.

So, according to the Genesis narrative, Abram did as God commanded and migrated to Canaan, establishing himself in God's land. But Abram still had no child, and without a child to be his

heir, God's promise to bless all the peoples of the earth through Abram's descendants would be an impossibility. Genesis 15, today's Old Testament lesson, tells the second story about Abram's commitment to God. It is the story of the covenant made between God and Abram that would be realized in a son!

In the ancient Near East, the covenant was the primary means by which agreements were made. Written contracts were not normally used. We know about the nature of this covenant making through the Mari tablets that explain the covenanting process in detail. It is those tablets that make sense out of this otherwise-mystifying story.

When two participants would come to binding agreement upon a matter, they would verbally make the agreement to each other. Then, those making the agreement would slay a bird or an animal, divide it in two and lay the two pieces as mirror images upon the ground but with a pathway between them. Then those making the agreement would walk between the halved animals while repeating the agreement before witnesses. In essence, the covenant-maker, by walking through the halved animal or bird, was declaring "may you do the same to me and cut me in half if I break this covenant with you"!

If, on the other hand, one of the parties to the covenant was not making any commitment, he merely observed. But those making the covenant would walk between the halved animals. Thus, the covenant was binding only upon those who walked through the halved animals – so binding, in fact, that if one party to the covenant broke the agreement, the other would have the legal right to kill him!

In the dramatic story told in Genesis 15, God made a covenant with Abram to create an entire nation through him. Then God made that covenant specific by promising this nearly 100-year-old man would physically sire a son in his 100-year old wife!

The Bible tells us that Abram "believed the Lord, and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6). But God wanted to confirm his promise to Abram; he wished to make a binding covenant with this wanderer. Therefore, God instructed Abram to slay several animals and birds, cut them in half and lay their divided bodies over-against each other, creating a pathway between them. Then God, in the symbolic form of a fire pot and torch, passed between the halved animals, repeating his promise to Abram!

It is particularly notable that it is God who passes through the halved animals, repeating the covenant. It is not Abram. Abram sits and observes. In other words, it is God who makes the covenant with Abram, not Abram with God. God is the actor. Abram is the recipient. It is God who is taking all the risk; not Abram. God had bound himself securely to his promise – that Abram would have a son who would become the forebear of an entire nation through which all the world would be blessed. If God did not fulfill his promise, Abram would have the prerogative to "kill" him (that is to reject him as God). But God asked nothing of Abram! There was no response that would cause Abram to break covenant, no reason for God to "kill" him! And Abram chose to "believe the Lord"! As a sign of this commitment by God to Abram, God changes his name to Abraham (17:4), from "exalted ancestor" to "ancestor of a multitude"!

This is the first clearly evident presentation and demonstration of the concept of grace in the scriptures!

The covenant between Abraham and God reflected the Israelites' understanding of the importance of the agreement made at Mount Sinai nearly eight hundred years later – the agreement which held the nation of Israel together and gave it a reason for existence. The Israelites could take assurance that the covenant made between Moses and God was no light matter. God had bound God's self as irrevocably to Israel as God had to Abraham. And therefore, like Abraham, Israel could "believe God and it would be counted to them as righteousness".

**Psalm 27** is a hymn of trust in God – a testimony to this psalmist's confidence that Yahweh will protect him in this life and will enable him to gaze upon God's presence in eternal life. As such, it is a clear indication that the Hebrew people believed in eternal life much earlier than biblical scholars of a generation ago asserted.

The psalm is divided into three parts. Verses 1-6 open the psalm with a clear (and beautiful) statement of the psalmist's and the worshipper's confidence and certainty in God and in God's protective intervention in his life. Verses 7-12 presents petitions that the worshipper presents to God the King in the light of that confidence. And then the psalm concludes with verses 13-14 which gives final testimony to the psalmist's trust in God and in the encouragement of other Yahweh worshippers to do the same.

Verses 1-6 open the psalm. "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh – my adversaries and foes – they shall stumble and fall. Though an army encamps against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident. One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple. For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock. Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the Lord" (vss. 1-6).

"Yahweh is my salvation. Whom would I possibly fear? Yahweh is my stronghold. Of whom would I be afraid?" The opening lines, in the usual parallel construction of Hebrew poetry, beautifully state the entire premise of this Psalm. That parallelism captures the breadth of the dynamic and power of this psalm.

First, "Yahweh is my salvation. Whom shall I fear?" God delivers the psalmist from all those who would seek to hurt or destroy him, whether they are political, economic or religious leaders from within Israel, private citizens who would seek to do him harm, or powerful political, religious or business leaders from outside the country. The question, "Whom shall I fear?" is particularly powerful. The Hebrew has the sense about it of "With God protecting me, who of consequence could possibly do anything to me that would be worthy of even the slightest attention?" It is as if the psalmist is saying, "It defies the imagination to even conceive of

anyone acting in such a way toward me that I should feel even the slightest smidgen of fear"! It is akin to St. Paul's magnificent statement, "If God is for us, who could possibly be against us" (Rom. 8:31).

Second, the parallel construction now has the psalmist declare, "Yahweh is my stronghold. Of whom would I be afraid?" Here the psalmist changes the metaphor. Whereas in the first phrase, God is looked upon as the great deliverer – the general, mighty in battle – in the second phrase, God is looked upon as a great defense against attack. He is not only the high walls of the city, nor even the thick ramparts of the palace-castle. He is the very keep of the castle, where no one can get through the multiple doors – or even if they get through the first door, will be trapped by the second or even the third and thus will be slaughtered by the soldiers high on the parapets. Again, in the light of such godly protection, "of whom would I possibly be afraid?"

The psalmist then continues in verses two through six to flesh out this assertion of the deliverance and protection of God. He does this in a series of images. If his foes seek to destroy him (the phrase, "devour my flesh" is not a literal reference to cannibalism but was a popular metaphor throughout the Near East for destroying someone), "they shall stumble and fall". If an army besieges the psalmist, their siege will come to naught. If people rise up in protest or attack on his person, "yet will I be confident" (vs. 2-3). God will "shelter" him, "conceal" him but will also "set me high on a rock" (vs. 5). To "set high on a rock" is a reference to a defensive position in battle that allows for an overwhelming offense. To be "high on a rock" is to have your military forces physically high above the enemy (either on a rock outcropping or on a high wall, so that the enemy is forced to attack your position by running uphill, both making their advance slow and making them vulnerable to an offensive hurtling down upon them). Thus, God will protect him against all the machinations of his enemies, whether those enemies are pagan nations or fellow Israelites. God will allow him to mount a strong defense.

This psalmist asks only "one thing of the Lord". That is to seek after Yahweh, to "live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life," to behold the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple" (vs. 4). The words, "the house of the Lord" are not simply a reference to Solomon's Temple. The context of this psalm makes it clear that this is a reference to the heavenly habitation of God (cf. vss. 5, 8, 9, 13), a vision of the next life. The result of God's protection of the psalmist and other believers in Yahweh and gifting them to attack God's enemies is that "my head is lifted up and I will offer in Yahweh's tent sacrifices with joy" (vs. 6).

This moves us to the second portion of the psalm (vss. 7-12) that deal with petitions to God. The psalmist has made a strong assertion about God in the first six verses of this psalm – that God will protect, deliver and defend God's people, so that they can be confident in Him. The psalmist and worshippers trust and hope that this assertion is, indeed, true. To be sure that such certainty is not ill-advised, these worshippers make petition of God. Will God hear their cry for help (vs. 7)? Will God reveal his face to them (vs. 8)? Will God not forsake them when their obedience of him gets them in trouble with the "powers that be" (vs. 9)? If even one's mother and father forsake him, will God still be present to him (vs. 10)? Will God "teach me your ways" (vs. 11) and protect one from "my adversaries" (vs. 12)? One senses the trust and surety of the author. But also one senses the anxiety and hesitancy of the psalmist, because he has really "gone out on a limb" for God and God's kingdom!

But the moment of trepidation passes, so that the Psalmist can end as well as he began. Third. “I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord” (vss. 13-14).

This third statement is the clearest statement in the psalm of the psalmist’s belief in eternal life. The traditional translation of verse 13 is indeed beautiful. But the Hebrew can be better translated, “I trust to behold the beauty of Yahweh in the land of life eternal”. The term, “the beauty of Yahweh” is used throughout the Old Testament to describe eternal happiness in the presence of God, not that God is breathtakingly beautiful (e.g., see Exod. 33:19, Hos. 10:11; Zech. 9:17, Psalm 17:15). And that presence will be in *hayyim*, “life eternal” (e.g., Psalm 21:5, 36:10; Dan. 12:2; intriguingly, the same use of the word appears in the Ugaritic Text, circa 1300-1200 BCE [II Aqht. 6:27-29], demonstrating that the concept of eternal life existed in ancient thought, well before the writing of Psalm 27).

What the psalmist has done in this psalm, therefore, is quite remarkable. He has linked together God’s continuing watch-care of God’s people, those people’s consistent living out of the covenant between themselves and God and the reward to consistent ethical and social behavior of “beholding the beauty of Yahweh in the land of life eternal”. The psalmist is declaring that God has called God’s people to the work of building the world as God intended it to be (a shalom society of political justice, economic equity and a relational culture). To do so will inevitably mean opposition from those who want a society of oppressive power, the exploiting of the poor in order to build personal wealth, and a culture of command and control. Such people and their political, economic and religious institutions, both within Israel and outside it, will do everything possible to stop the building of a shalom society. As a result, they will attempt to defame, persecute and destroy the work of God’s people. But God will strengthen God’s people for this long struggle in two ways. First, God will protect, deliver and defend his people in this life. Second, God will promise those who are seeking to realize God’s intentions for the world a “land of life eternal” so that those who have lived their lives working for God’s kingdom of shalom will one day experience that kingdom and will experience it for all time and eternity! What a dream and what an assurance to give God’s persecuted legions!

**Luke 13:31-35** is the famous and pathos-filled story of Jesus weeping over the unrepentant city of Jerusalem. Many commentators have written about Jesus’ deep grief over this city that refuses to see salvation passing it by. However, it is intriguing that few take seriously the opening lines of the story, choosing to see those initiating words only as a transitional phrase. But it is not. Rather, those opening sentences are highly germane to the city.

““At that very hour (as Jesus spoke about “some (who) are last who will be first, and some (who) will be first will be last” (13:30), 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’.” (13:31-33)

Luke tells us that some Pharisees come to Jesus and alert him that Herod is out to stop him – to even kill him, if necessary. Why were the Pharisees warning Jesus in this way? There are two theories about the motive for their action. The first is that these are Pharisees who are sympathetic to Jesus, and who are genuinely warning him of the ire of this puppet monarch. The second is that these Pharisees are opposed to Jesus, but want him out of Herod’s reach and in their own territory closer to Jerusalem, where they can keep better watch on him and perhaps eliminate him themselves. Either way, the intention is the same – to get Jesus to leave Galilee and to return to Judah and Jerusalem.

Jesus’ response to their warning is intriguing. “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I (work) today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work (when) I will be on my way to Jerusalem’”. First, he calls Herod – the king of the region where Jesus lives – a “fox”. Second, he assumes that these Pharisees have direct access to Herod (“go and tell that fox”). In other words, Jesus is making a comment here about the religious and political systems of Israel.

The political system is “foxy”. At the time of Jesus, a fox was thought to be crafty, manipulative, intelligent and capable of malicious destructiveness. It was wise to steer clear of a “foxy” person. So he is saying that the political system of Israel, only existing at the behest of Rome and accountable to the empire, was not strong, but it was crafty. It had great potential for malicious destruction; it could do great harm.

But so was the religious system. The Pharisees didn’t really understand what it was that Jesus was about. They could not see that he was God’s servant sent to return Israel to political justice, economic equity and a relational faith. They had the potential to be “first”, because they had access to and knowledge of the Law that required Jubilee, the Sabbatical Year and the building of Israel into God’s shalom community. But they had chosen to be “last”, seeking to manipulate Jesus to escape the “foxy” threat of Herod back to Jerusalem where the religious establishment could then seek to eliminate him. But Jesus is telling them, he can see through both Herod’s and the Pharisees plans. He will return to Jerusalem. But he will do so as and when he chooses to do so, not when they try to manipulate him to return.

“Today” and “tomorrow”, Jesus will continue to do the work of healing, preaching, liberating people and calling the systems to accountability, and will do that work in foxy Herod’s own region. But “on the third day”, he will return to Jerusalem where he will finish the work given him by God. And how will he finish it? He will be executed by the systems – by Herod and the Pharisees, and by Pilate (Rome) and the chief priests (Israel’s power elite). For “it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem”. But his death will not be that of a helpless victim, destructively manipulated into execution by Herod or the pharisees or Rome or the high priests. When he dies, he will lay down his own life of his own free will (“on the third day I finish my work” – that is, I decide when it is ended and then choose to end it; you political and religious systems don’t choose it for me). So, Jesus is saying, he is not being fooled by the systems nor their “foxiness”. He knows how they seek to manipulate, exploit, dominate and oppress. He knows what they are up to. But it will be he who will decide the time and place of his death, for he will not be the manipulated victim of the systems.

But for whom will Jesus die? Here, Jesus breaks into one of the most powerful and heart-wrenching soliloquies in scripture, as one sees clearly revealed the pained and broken heart of God.

“Oh 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’.” (13:34-35)

This pivotal passage, its parallel in Matthew 23:37-39, and its companion passage of Luke 19:41-44 provide us with four insights that underlie the biblical work of salvation God would do through Christ for the city – and the city’s response!

*God’s love for the city is exceedingly patient.* Jerusalem, Jesus stated, had killed its prophets and stoned those who had brought unacceptable news from God. The one thousand year history of Jerusalem from David to Herod could best be described as a continuing and lengthy rejection of God’s intended work among God’s people. Both the systems and the powerful of Israel continually rejected God’s call to them through the prophets to seek to embrace city as shalom by working for justice for all, an equitable distribution of wealth and the building of a relational culture.

Jerusalem’s history included a wide spectrum of sin. The sin over which Jesus mourns is not simply the accumulation of the wrongdoing of Jerusalem’s individuals. It is also corporate, systemic and demonic sin, permeating every structure and aspect of city life. Yet God goes right on loving the city, forgiving her, and patiently starting all over again. God’s love for the city seems unending, so that we see Jesus weeping at the city’s obduracy rather than threatening its obliteration.

*Christ longs to see the city become the city of God.* “How often have I desired to gather your children together, . . . but you will not willing”. Jesus says. One can almost hear the pathos and sense of rejection in his voice. The city – as the abode of Satan as well as of God – always has killed its prophets and stoned its messengers. Yet Christ longs to see the city come to him, to become what it had been created to be: the city of God. In order for it to be what it can be, Christ has already done all that is necessary for the city to be redeemed and renewed. But it will not!

The city’s refusal breaks Jesus’ heart, for he knows the spiritual, social, and physical desolation toward which the city is inevitably propelling itself. He longs for it to choose him instead. As a result, his heart is broken over the city’s blindness and its unwillingness to accept his outstretched hands of love and appeal.

*Humanity refuses the city of God.* Luke 19:41 describes Jesus as weeping over the city, and Jesus’ words in Luke 13:34-35 are filled with such pain that they can come from nothing other than a breaking heart. Jesus weeps over Jerusalem precisely because the potential for the inhabitants’ salvation came to them, and they refused it.

This is why the city does not benefit from salvation. It is not that God does not provide it – he has provided it through Jesus Christ. Humanity refuses it. The city will not accept its salvation; it refuses the vision of itself as the city of God.

It is particularly important to note that the city's rejection of Christ is a corporate rejection. Jesus does not address people in 13:34-35. He addresses the city! "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and *you* were not willing" (Luke 13:34). It is the city that Jesus longs to gather to him as a hen gathers her chicks. It is the city's systems Jesus longs to fill with God's redeeming love. It is Jesus who wants to be the brooding hen over that city and its principalities and powers, rather than for the city to allow Satan to shape its interior spirituality. But it is the city that refuses to receive Christ as Lord of its corporate life. It is the city – and not simply its inhabitants – that therefore must be rejected.

*Inevitable consequences come upon the city that rejects Christ.* "Look", Jesus sobs in Luke 13:35, "your house is forsaken" (RSV). In the companion Lukan passage, Jesus is even more specific: "The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you" (Luke 19:43-44, NIV).

Both the Luke 13 and Luke 19 passages are statements that simply cannot be individualized or "spiritualized" away. These are corporate statements, made to a city. A city will be destroyed because a city refused to recognize the redemptive events occurring within it. Because the city rejected its moment of liberation, its opportunity was gone – and salvation would have to await a Second Coming.

Thus, Jerusalem is doomed to a continuing cycle of destruction and restoration – even today! It still cannot see its salvation drawing nigh nor, apparently, does it even seek it. Instead, two thousand years after Jesus spoke these words, Jerusalem – and its present jingoistic state arrayed against Palestinian refugees – gives itself more fully than ever to accumulating power, prestige and possessions while building a parochial solidarity!

God's love for the city is exceedingly patient. Christ longs to see the city become the city of God. Humanity refuses the city of God. Inevitable consequences come upon the city that rejects Christ. These four emphases in the story of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem provide for us an understanding about what it is that Jesus has done for the city. For the first shall be last, and the last will be first.

**Philippians 3:17—4:1** deals with the decisions we make as Christians either to center our lives upon the worship and service of God and humanity or upon our own personal priorities and pursuits.

The apostle begins, "Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us" (3:17). The previous section of the third chapter of



Philippians had been intensely autobiographical, as Paul shared how he gave up allegiance to the Law and to liturgical purity so that he might “know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death” (3:10). Now, in today’s epistle lesson, it becomes clear why Paul had written this autobiographical section.

As Paul imitated Christ by centering himself upon Christ’s kingdom rather than personal satisfaction, so he now advises the Philippian Christians to imitate him by doing the same. The Greek of this passage captures that intent even more strongly than it is possible to do in its English translation, for it could be translated “become co-imitators with me of Christ” (see I Cor. 11:1).

Paul then moves on to present a dichotomy of the living of one’s life. One can live for Christ and his kingdom. Or one can live for “the belly” and for “shame” (i.e., sexual excess). The contrasts Paul presents are significant. One can center one’s life on heavenly citizenship or earthly pleasures, glory in shame or sharing glory in Christ, destruction at the end of life or transformation into the heavenly kingdom, citizenship in heaven or citizenship on earth (3:19-21). You choose! So choose Christ! Choose to imitate Paul to the degree he imitates Christ!

Perhaps the most intriguing metaphor Paul uses in this comparison is “citizenship in heaven” (vs. 20). In the Philippian context, that is a very strategically used metaphor to get across his point. Philippi was, like Tarsus, a Roman colony; the city had been created by Rome. Therefore, all who were citizens of it were, ipso facto, Roman citizens. To be born in Philippi automatically made you a Roman citizen. The result was a great deal of justifiable pride on the part of Philippian citizens (that is, it was more prestigious to be born a Roman citizen than to have to purchase citizenship – see Acts 22:27-28).

Further, Paul refers to Jesus as “Savior” (vs. 20), a rarely used reference to Christ in the New Testament (the word “Lord” was more commonly used). The title, “savior”, was rarely used of Jesus in the New Testament because only one person in the Roman Empire had the right to that title: the Roman emperor. Therefore, this is a very political statement that Paul is making when he contrasts Roman citizenship to heavenly citizenship, Jesus as Savior to the emperor as savior. The Christian faith is intentionally being contrasted by Paul to Roman faith and priorities, and it is Rome that is coming off unfavorably, not Christ!

What Paul is doing here, therefore, is that he is saying to the Philippians, “You cherish your Roman citizenship. Well, there is a higher citizenship – and that is to be a citizen of heaven. You see the emperor as your protector (savior). Well, you have a greater savior than the emperor: Jesus. It is your citizenship in heaven and your relationship with Christ that you should cherish, not your status in the Roman empire.” That may seem obvious to us. But for Paul to say such in the first century C.E. was shocking – and even revolutionary!

So Paul concludes, “stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved” (4:1). Choose Christ! Choose Christian citizenship! Do not choose the political, economic, social or spiritual establishment of Rome or Israel. And having chosen for Christ and his kingdom, stand firm in that choice and do not waver. It will be upon such firmness that the Church will stand against and even defeat Rome. And it will be upon such firmness that you, yourself, will stand!

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