

St. Paul's – Lent II

“A LENTEN CALL TO FAITH”

A reflection on Genesis 15:1-18, Philippians 3:17-4:1, Luke 13:31-35

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As Christians we are now well into the season of Lent, a season for contemplating what it means to be Disciples of Christ, what it means to say that we accept the teachings of Christ as a model for our lives. When I first looked over the readings for this morning they seemed kind of un-Lenten-like, they don't speak of penitence or of self-denial but rather of a call to faith and discipline, a call to think deeply about our relationship with God, how we live out our lives in Christ both internally and externally, and about God's love for us.

Jesus says, “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.” (Luke 13:32). We live in a world where there's much work to be done. A world where the demons take many forms. The demons that drive us to strive endlessly for material gain, to amass more and more things in the hope that they will fill the void in our souls, but ultimately leave us empty and disillusioned. The demons that entice us to numb ourselves to our deep emptiness with alcohol, drugs, sex, and overindulgence in food. The demons that blind us to the destruction of our world by those whose only god has become Profit. The demons that make us indifferent to the plight of our brothers and sisters who live in abject poverty, in the grip of mental illness, or to those that are simply different from us. And the Prince of these demons is Fear. Fear of saying, “I have enough.” Fear of stopping the endless fight for money and things. Fear of giving ourselves the time to look deeply into our own souls and with a quiet and clear mind, unclouded by drugs, alcohol, or busy schedules, to face and grapple with that emptiness within us. Fear of speaking out against the destroyers of our world. Fear of reaching out to our brothers and sisters who are hungry, oppressed, or who are just different. Fear of leaving the comfort of the familiar, of trying something difficult, something that might result in the heartache of failure or the soul-filling joy of accomplishment. Fear of even thinking about which of these demons hold sway in our own lives, and fear of taking those dangerous steps that are required to cure our brothers and sisters of theirs. During this season of Lent I think we are called to think about those demons, which of them keeps us in their grip, which of them keeps us from living as Christ would have us live.

“At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, ‘Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you’”. Run away from this world flee from the illegitimate and fearsome powers of this world and leave it to its demons. Run away from your brothers and sisters, leave them to their own devices. Run away

from these uncomfortable thoughts of demons holding sway in your life. There's nothing I can do about them anyway, and besides this is a frightening prospect for me. 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.'" Jesus knew the dangers of his time, he was no fool, he knew where the power lay and who could and would exercise it. Yet he says, "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." He says I will do the work now, and tomorrow that I need to do. I will do the work that I need to do today and tomorrow and the next day, and I don't fear you. You hold no power over me. You may kill me but you hold no real power over me, because on that third day, that day after you've done your worst, I'll still finish my work.

But let's not think that Jesus is just speaking to Herod and the power structure of his time, he is speaking to his fellow Israelites, he is speaking to us. He knows that, "it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem." He knows that it is those who profess to love God and follow God's ways that will reject him just as surely as the Herod's of this world will. It is those of us who know what they are called to do, the ones that he desires together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, that are not willing, who are held in the grip of fear.

I think that ultimately we Christians are called to that kind of courage. The courage that begins by looking un sentimentally at our own demons and the fear they inspire in us. To take this Lenten season and to dig deep into ourselves so that we can find a way to say listen, go and tell that fox, that fearsome fox for me, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow,." If this seems a daunting task...you're right, it is. But it is one that we neglect to our peril. St. Paul said, "For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their God is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things." (Phillipians 3: 18-19). If we do not take the time every now and then to take stock of lives and how they fall short of what our brother Christ calls us to. We may not actively become "enemies of the cross" but we run the very real risk of becoming complacent. We allow the Herod's of this age to exercise their power unopposed even in our minds. We allow the demons of this age to ensnare us and keep us of from casting them out and performing the cures that we are called to perform for our brothers and sister.

If this seems a daunting task, it is. But if we think that only extraordinary people are called to such contemplation, or such actions, think again. Was Abram an extraordinary man? I think he was but it wasn't because of his valour in battle or his courage in the face of his enemies, or his prowess or his fertility. His extraordinariness lay in his faith. In his willingness to respond to God's call. He accepted God's call of *Lech l'cha* to, "Go forth from your country and your kindred, and your father's house to the land that I will show you." (Gen 12:1) Not to that land just over there or that country that you've heard about but, "to the

land that I will show you.” He left everything that was familiar to him to venture into the entirely unknown, based on God’s call. Can you imagine the soul searching it would have taken to pack up your entire household at age 75 and tell them, “we’re leaving.” Where to? I don’t know but God told me to leave and God will show me where we’re going.....Right! He accepted it on faith alone. Then after years of wandering when he finds himself childless and faced with the prospect of leaving his entire inheritance to a slave, God tells him, “do not be afraid Abram...Look toward the heavens and count the stars, if you are able to count them...so shall your descendant be” (Gen 15), he again simply believed it. And it’s this belief this deep faith that the, “Lord reckoned (it) to him as righteousness.” (Gen 15:6) It is this faith, this simple acceptance of the possibility of God’s promise, even in the face of all evidence to the contrary that we are called to and that Abram responds to. God rewards this faith by entering into a covenant, a *b’rit*, a binding agreement on God’s part to keep God’s word. God shows acceptance of Abram’s sacrifice of belief by passing as fire between the pieces of his offering. And what does God ask in return? Faith, belief that it will be as God has said. “To your descendants I give this land.” It won’t be an easy journey, says God, “your people will be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years,” but to your descendants I will give this land.”

Now, we can read Abram’s story as the story of a physical journey but it is equally important to see it as a spiritual journey, as one man’s response to God’s call to leave the familiar, to venture into the unknown, to search the depths of his soul and say “I believe” in God’s promise. I believe in it enough to act by searching my own heart deeply and honestly and then to convince others to act even if this is not a comfortable or safe thing to do. I believe in this promise of a better place enough to take the risk of faith. I think that during Lent we are asked to look into our souls in this way. I think we are compelled to ask ourselves hard questions about how we will respond to God’s call to us. Will we like Abram leave the comfortable and the familiar to venture where God through Christ is calling us to go? Will we look into ourselves and look demon fear in the eyes and say, Listen, Go and tell that fox for me, I will look for the courage to cast out my own demons today so that I might help cure others? Will we contemplate taking the risk of speaking out against injustice or for a better vision of our society so that like the prophets we put ourselves in real jeopardy in the very place we call home, in our church, in our Jerusalem? Will we believe in our heart of hearts that we are called to be “citizens of heaven”? That if we live in the courage of faith *this* will be God’s promised land?

I think it is these difficult things that we are called to contemplate particularly in Lent. I think that if we take the time and have the courage to examine ourselves in this way, there will be great rewards for us and for our brothers and sisters with whom we share our lives in this world. Our brother Christ awaits us with outstretched wings.