

The Lenten road we travel gets serious this week. We have a collection of readings that take us deeper down the path, and the press of Jesus' beckoning becomes heavier. Are we ready for this?

We begin with Abram - a man soon to be renamed by God Abraham. He has been receiving God's attention: It is to Abram that God makes God's promises - promises about God's intention for him. To Abram God promises offspring and to make a great nation from him. There is a problem though, Abram is an old man and his wife Sarai, an old woman. Not only that, Abram has heard all this before from God. It's in chapter 12 that God reaches out to Abram with these promises. There, we read:

“Go from your country... to the land I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ...in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Between then, when Abram was 75, and our reading today, time has passed, and Abram and Sarai have only grown older. We can hear the angst, the confusion, even anger of Abram when he says: “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” It seems Abram needs some encouragement.

God seeks to give it to him, first with an image - “Look toward heaven and count the stars... So shall your descendants be”. But Abram persists: “O Lord God, how am I to know?”

This question resonates with each of us, does it not? Especially now? In the midst of an all out assault on a democratic country that is threatening to spiral into all out, global war; In the midst of a pandemic that seems to be calming but has transformed our neighbor from those in whom we can love God as God would have us love into untrustworthy vectors of disease; In the midst of a lenten path that is said to lead to the manifestation of all God's promises, but seems less certain as we look at the world around us. This question breaks through our protective exteriors: How are we to know, O God, that your promises are sure?

Abram and we are in need of something more - some serious medicine. And here, God delivers.

Abram is instructed to bring a collection of animals (a heifer, a goat, a ram, a turtledove and a young pigeon) and cut them in half. When the sun had gone down, we read, "a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these [animal] pieces..." It was in this way, that God took those promises spoken to Abram and made a covenant with Abram.

What just happened?

Such a scene would have been well known to the people these words were addressed to. Let me explain.

Scholars generally believe the book of Genesis was compiled in ancient Babylon during the great exile. Remember with me that the Babylonian Empire destroyed Jerusalem in the 6th century BC and brought most of its inhabitants home to Babylon. At that time, it was common practice for conquering armies to illustrate to the conquered their status as conquered, and they did it in exactly this way: Forced to march into exile between the carcasses of its own livestock, the conquered were “impressed” with their loss. And even more, this march was meant to form a covenant in which the conquered people agreed (or promised) to be ruled. Make sense?

So back to Abram. This smoking fire pot and flaming torch floating down the path between these grizzly, dead animals, is God performing a covenant (in the most sober and serious terms) with Abram. But instead of God promising to be ruled, God is performing a commitment to keeping God’s promises.

This is a stretch for 21st century ears, but so are a lot of things. Thank goodness we have a gospel reading to help us make sense of it all. Unfortunately, this story from Luke lacks the kind of clarity I think we are in need of. But a few things are clear.

First, Jesus is not going to turn from his path even, under threat of death. This scene takes place in a central section of Luke 's gospel described as "Jesus' Last Journey to Jerusalem." Chapters 9 through 19 of Luke's 24 chapters chronicle his journey to Jerusalem. Here in chapter 13, to the Pharisees telling him that Herod wants him killed, Jesus says basically, "I will not be turned away from the work I have to do and the path it takes me down."

But then this lament over Jerusalem.

From our reading in Psalm 27 we hear these words, "Teach me your way, O Lord, lead me on a level path" and this, "For in the day of trouble, God will give me shelter." In this lament over Jerusalem, Jesus seems to speak with the voice of God, the voice of one with a much longer relationship with the people of 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.

So sit with me for a moment in these two images. A smoking fire pot and a flaming torch floating between the severed carcasses of livestock. And this house of which Jesus speaks in tones of lament.

Over the last few months, I've been doing some intense study of the history of the American west with a special focus on the cultures and experience of the aboriginal peoples in this part of North America. This study has included the current day circumstances and issues that these first people face. Two such issues have received much indigenous attention and relatively little mainstream American news coverage: The recently uncovered mass graves of native children who died while in the custody of [residential schools](#). And the huge and growing number of Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women. What's become clear to me is that these current issues are part of the legacy of the history of North America's colonization.

You know that history which began in 1492, and led to the settlement of this land by Europeans and the eventual forming of the United States. It's a history full of hard work, of sacrifice and determination. But this history is also filled with people stripped of their language, their culture, their way of life, their connection to the land, through systematic, intentional and deceptive means. But that history is something not a single one of us had anything to do with. In fact it's hard to see any kind of link between us and those who colonized these lands. And why would we even want to? Why would we even want to?

To answer this question, I want to share with you a powerful illustration I've come across in my studies.

Think of the US as an old house. A very old house. And like all old houses do, it's begun showing signs of distress. These are easy enough to point out. Some chipped paint here, some dated light fixtures there, drafty windows maybe, and floors that need some attention. Then there are more serious issues - structural integrity issues. These must take priority.

That bulge in the ceiling for instance. Much smaller a few weeks ago, it has been growing. Should we ignore it? Probably wise, not knowing what we might find happening back there. Best to put it out of mind. But if we want this house to continue standing, to continue sheltering us, we had better take a closer look and see what's going on - maybe | something can be done.

That growing bulge is a problem, certainly, and one we had absolutely nothing do with - it's not there by our actions. But we've inherited this house, and if we want to pass it on to our children, as I believe we do, do we not have a responsibility to address such things?

It's an interesting metaphor to be using at this point in the life of this congregation - on the cusp (as we are) of beginning construction on a new house, a new church home. This is an exciting time. A lot of hard work, sacrifice and determination have brought this community to this place in our life together, and we have much for which to be thankful. We don't have a hard time examining these things and telling that story. But there is a bulge in the ceiling, my friends - a bulge that needs our attention.

That attention is what I believe God is giving in this path God is treading, between these animal pieces, with this smoking fire pot and flaming torch. God is acknowledging (even examining) the sin and carnage of human life and history - looking it full in the face, giving it close attention. That attention though, is what I believe God is also seeking - seeking from us.

Could God be inviting Abram to follow that path, the path Jesus invites us to follow in this season of Lent? A journey that will bring him and us face to face with the sins of the past, the sin we might rather not see? The sin that lives in the history of the land on which we build our new home needs examining, it needs engaging, if we are to build something we hope to share and eventually pass on to generations to come. In this way, with the help of God this land we call home might yet be healed, might be brought back into right relationship and the light of these Beartooths might shine undimmed through this place, by its people, for all to see.

With your blessing, the un-familiar history and oft untold stories of this place that includes the Hw 78 land, I will hold up in the months to come. And I'll invite you to look with me.

Like God's invitation, this is not an invitation to guilt or shame. This is an invitation to a Lenten honesty about the history of this place - a history that has helped make possible the building of this new church. It will not be easy to look, to keep looking, to engage or wrestle with this history, but neither will it be easy in the end to look upon the face of our savior who week by week is moving closer to his death. The more fully we are able to "take in" these unfamiliar stories, the more clearly we will see the healing redemption that Jesus brings through the death he died for all.

When that road gets hard, my friends, keep in mind two things. First, keep this copy of Psalm 27. Go back to it, refer to it, remember these words.

Second, remember this story from Genesis - the story of God establishing God's covenant. For the covenant God establishes in this peculiar way, in the sight of all that humans are capable of, is God's covenant (God's promise) to keep God's promises - these promises to Abram that have come now to be God's promises to us as well. See yourself the way God sees you: As part of the uncountable constellations of Abram descendants, creatures of God's beloved attending.

As continue in Lent, it is my hope that God's invitation for us to attend to the path we follow | will reveal ( all the more ) to you, FOR YOU, the depth and breadth, the fullness, beauty and unbounded source of the gracious love that is the promise of God. May it be so.

AMEN



