

A sermon preached on 2 Lent, March 16, 2025
at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT by The Rt Rev. Gordon Scruton

Genesis 15:1-12,17-18. Psalm 27. Philippians 3:17-4:1. Luke 13:31-35

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We are here this morning because we have had some positive experience of God, of the Bible, of worship and of Christian community that has helped to ground and sustain our lives. Though we may not be aware of it, we have also brought with us our fears, our questions, our doubts.

This morning seems like God wants to help us with our mixed feelings of faith and fear because all four of our Scripture readings tell stories about how people in different times and places struggled to hold together their faith and their fears. So, we will have four mini-sermons about what was going on in the life of Abraham, in the Psalm writer, in Paul and in Jesus. I invite you to listen for something in each story which might be helpful to you and to us as a community as we live with BOTH our faith and our fears at this time in our lives.

Abram, or Abraham as God later named him, lived long before Moses received the Ten Commandments. There was no temple, no community to worship with. God just showed up in Abram's life, sometimes in a dream, sometimes through angels, sometimes through strangers who spoke God's guidance to him. Abram tried to trust and follow the occasional snippets of guidance God gave him. But it was a lonely journey which often didn't make any sense to him. God promised him that he would have a male heir to carry on his family line and inherit the land in which Abram lived. But Abram and his wife Sarah had not been able to have a child, they were both getting older and he was afraid there would be no future like God had promised.

So, when God showed up in a vision and said, "Abram, do not be afraid. I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." Abram said, I know you promised that to me, but Sarah and I have not had a child yet. How can I trust your promise of guidance?

In the vision, God brought Abram outside his tent and said, "Look up and count the stars, if you are able to count them." God was saying, look at the magnificent Creation in which you live. I'm the one who created everything in the universe. Since I created all the stars, can't you trust that I can take care of your future? God said again, remember, I'm the one who created you and have guided you throughout the journey of your life. You can trust me to keep guiding you. Abram still had his doubts and fears...so he kept asking God questions: "O Lord God, how am I to know that I and my descendants will possess this land?" So God invited Abram to make the kind of sacrifice primitive religions were practicing at that time as a way to make a covenant, an official agreement between God and Abram.

So how did Abram handle his faith and his doubts and fears? Abram talked very honestly and directly with God about his fears. And God did not criticize Abram for his doubts and fears. God invited him to walk into creation and be reminded that the God who created all the stars could take care of creating and continuing to guide Abram's future.

What about Abram's experience might be helpful to you as you hold both your faith and your fears?...

Now we turn to today's Psalm. The book of Psalms is an anthology of prayer poems probably written over a period of more than 500 years by Jewish people who sang them to express many the kinds of interactions between people and God. Some are Psalms of praise, adoration and thanks, some are

prayers of lament, other of anger, pain and great sadness, and some, like our Psalm today are a mixture of praise and fears.

Please follow along in your scripture insert. Psalm 27 is divided into two sections. The first part is filled with confident trust in the goodness and greatness of God. “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear: the Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid.” (verse 3) “Though an army should encamp against me, yet my heart shall not be afraid; and though war should rise up against me, yet will I put my trust in God.” The Psalm writer knows about the realities of fear, of enemies, of evil threatening his life. But in the face of his fears and threats and dangers, he keeps returning to his deep trust in God no matter what comes.

Yet, beginning in verse 10, he begins to talk about his fears, begging God to hear his voice, have mercy and answer his cries for help. (Verse 12): Don’t hide your face from me or turn away from your servants’ prayers for help. (Verse 15) he begs God to show him the best way forward in his life, to lead him because of his enemies. Don’t let my adversaries capture me, for people are saying lies about me, maliciously.

Then in verse 17 he returns to his faith: What if I had not believed that I should see the goodness of the Lord right now, in the midst of the daily realities in which I am living? He reminds himself to wait patiently for God’s timing; because eventually God will show up to help, so he needs to be strong in his faith trusting that God will comfort his heart; he needs to wait patiently for God to help.

Many Psalms are like this one, beginning with faith in God and then moving into doubts and fears and ending up with a stronger sense of trust in God. Something happens to the Psalmist and can happen in us when we write down on paper, like writing a letter or in a journal, expressing first our gratitude, our deep knowing faith and positive experiences with God AND then our real and deep fears, doubts, anxieties about what is going on in our lives.

What about the Psalm writer’s experience might be helpful to you as you carry both your faith and your fears?...

Next, Paul writes to the early Christian community in Philippi, Greece. Paul reminds them that they need to be patient and aware that God’s timing is eternal time, not just human time, or as we say in our generation, nano second time. He points out, not with anger, but with tears, that many people in Philippi only lived to satisfy their greed for getting their own way, greed for power, money, popularity. Paul says, “Their minds are set only on earthly things.”

Several years ago I saw two bumper stickers: one said: “The one who has the most toys in the end wins.” The other said: “Work/Buy/Consume/Die.” These bumper stickers were modern versions of the superficial and destructive perspectives Paul observed in first century Philippi.

Paul reminds his readers that we were all created by God and put on this planet for a few years as part of God’s eternal plan. And, there is more to life than life on this planet. In the middle of the many real problems of life here on earth, God created us and sent us to earth to live here as citizens of heaven, meaning, we were all made to live in loving relationships with God and all our neighbors, beginning on this earth and continuing for eternity. So we are waiting, expecting that Christ will keep coming to help us, day by day, then at our death and finally at the end of the world to transform our merely human bodies by his Holy Spirit at work in us, so that we embody more fully the Love and life God created us to embody and which Christ embodied when he was on this earth. Paul reminds his readers that the end goal

of Christ is to transform all people, all things into embodiments of God's love on earth and on into eternity.

So Paul invites Jesus followers to look at the problems of their lives from the larger, hope-filled perspective of God's eternal or cosmic plan and purpose being worked out in and through Christ to bring about God's kingdom of love, justice, peace and harmony on earth as it is in heaven.

What about Paul's spiritual guidance to the Philippians might be helpful to you as you experience both your faith and your fears?...

Finally, in today's Gospel Jesus is warned by the Pharisees that his life is in danger because Herod, the Roman ruler, wants to kill him. In that moment, Jesus was not afraid. I can imagine a relaxed smile coming over his face as he responded: You go tell that foxy Herod that I've got work to do. God sent me to love, teach and heal in a few more communities here, then to continue on to Jerusalem, no matter what Herod may say or do. Jesus just goes about his daily work of embodying the love of God, recognizing that sometimes love requires great sacrifice in the face of evil and injustice. He knows that to overcome evil with good, he will have to die.

Then, Jesus seems to pause, and speak wistfully of his love for the people of Jerusalem, including all the generations of people who had killed God's prophets in Jerusalem, including his loving desire for Herod, and Pilate and the Roman soldiers who would nail him to his death on the cross, including all the people who would treat Jesus unjustly, verbally and physically abuse him, yell out crucify him, and the including Judas his betrayer and Peter who denied knowing him and his disciples who abandoned him. Jesus loves them all to the end. He gives the people listening to him this powerful image of his love: So often I've wanted to love and care for all of you like a mother hen who gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing to accept my love. Jesus, and those listening to Jesus would have known stories of fires in the wild in which a mother hen gathers her chicks under her wings and the fire kills the mother, but after the fire is over, the chicks are still safely alive under their mother's wings. In that moment Jesus visually demonstrates the depth of God's love for the whole human race and Christ's trust in the love of His Heavenly Father.

Yet, fast forward to the night before he was crucified, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was overwhelmed by the dark depths of his fears and doubts. He begged his friends to pray for him. His disciples said he sweat drops of blood as he anguished in prayer. Somehow, with God's help, in that very dark time, he was able to return to the words he had prayed throughout his life, "thy will, not mine be done". He was able to trust that Good Friday horrors could separate him from the love in the heart of God. Jesus held his faith and his fears together by constantly praying and practicing that simple prayer: "Thy will, not mine be done."

What about Jesus' example might be helpful to you as you carry both your faith and your fears?...

Let us close our eyes...and ask God to help us remember the ways that Abram, and the Psalm writer, and Paul and Jesus all held together or integrated both their faith and their fears. What might God want you to take home with you from these stories that might help you hold together both your faith and your fears this week?...

O loving God, help us learn, like Abram, the Psalmist, Paul and Jesus, how to hold together both our faith-trust in you and our fearful doubts by the power of your Holy Spirit at work in us this week and all our days. Amen.