

March 13, 2022 – Second Sunday of Lent

¹After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” ²But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” ³And Abram said, “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” ⁴But the word of the LORD came to him, “This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.” ⁵He brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” ⁶And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

⁷Then he said to him, “I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.” ⁸But he said, “O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?” ⁹He said to him, “Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” ¹⁰He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. ¹¹And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

¹²As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.

¹⁷When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. ¹⁸On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.”

A year ago, the favored dark-humor joke for Lent was that Lent 2020 never ended. It became a 50-some-odd week and counting. We were still enduring the Lentiest Lent that had ever Lented.

This week, it's popular to say that it was almost precisely two years ago that we experienced our last "normal week" and we didn't even realize it at the time.

We may be emerging from the pandemic ... we hope, but it's early to say. It's questionable what humankind has learned during this time of great upheaval, if we are better prepared for the days that lie ahead of us and what they may bring. The troubles of our world, however we may become aware of them, flipping channels on the TV screen, dings of alerts on our phones, concerned tones broadcast across the airwaves that we tune into on our car speakers as we drive, it starts to sound like there's a cosmic game of Whack-A-Mole going on. For every conflict that dies down, another pops up

here and another there and it's impossible to be nimble enough to keep up.

Jesus warded off the devil as we heard a Sunday ago with the insight from Scripture that one does not live on bread alone, but from every Word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord. I am trying to absorb the echo of that teaching as we hear the Scriptures appointed for this day. Every person at the center of the story in each of today's readings has reason for fear, apprehension, discomfort with the world as it is around them, and has a longing for God's mercy to show up in the midst of it.

Abram frets that his days have grown short and his legacy is likely to be insubstantial and forgotten. This passage is often uplifted for the example of Abraham's faith found in verse 6, "the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness." Yet it is God who holds steadfastly faithful to this patriarch while Abram's own faith wavers. God

promises a shield of protection and still Abram worries about the main thing he was worried about all his days. *I never had a child of my own. I don't have God's promise in the form I know to expect. And I can't see how this is able to be remedied.*

It's telling that God doesn't immediately answer Abram's plea. God lets him continue, lets him reiterate what's gnawing at him the most. It's good to see God at work in this way. Letting petition to the Lord go unabated, letting a child of God pour out their heart and confess, "This is really what's bothering me and I *cannot* get past it. Do you hear? Let me say it again in case you didn't hear."

As we long for God, God longs for our open and honest dialogue. Not to wait until we have the right words, the best words ... but to hear our heart's confession where it is at any particular moment. Put another way, God would rather hear us say something dumb, something clumsily as part of a

conversation, a connection, a relationship than to say nothing at all.

Abram's reward – a free gift, really, for he does nothing to earn it – is ultimately to be not just a father but a father of nations. And God's gift always at work with him is patience. For even this man whose faith God praises gives in to his doubts.

When he is no longer Abram but Abraham, he and his wife Sarah laugh at the preposterousness of God's blessing to them that they will conceive a child together at their advanced age. This after they have taken matters into their own hands, as it were, and you get Hagar and Ishmael and it gets a lot more complicated awfully quick. God sees fit to run Abraham through this whole many-descendants, many-nations thing with him again, in case he has forgotten.

The famous idiom is that we make plans, God laughs. But the flip side is that when God makes plans, time and

again, we laugh. We find that God's ways don't make sense to us. In fact, they can seem rather silly. And yet God will see it through. God will see us through, as God always has.

And God will lay the groundwork for the breaking of harmful cycles, even when human systems are stubbornly resistant and are not ready for the change that must come to break down barriers and open up greater freedom. Eliezer, Abram's slave, is a seeming afterthought in this story. But the slaves in Abram's life are not forgotten by God and are treated quite a bit better by God than by Abram and Sarai. Eliezer is taken up directly into heaven alive, Genesis says.

Hagar has a remarkable encounter with God in which God rescues her and her son Ishmael in the desert, giving her assurance of providence. Her child, too, becomes a great nation. While even the renowned names of Abraham and Sarah have their faults, their blind spots, their shortcomings ... all exacerbated in the midst of circumstances that

overwhelm them. I look back at their stories and wonder why the sin of slavery is not readily addressed as such in these ancient days, why it's cast aside and permitted to continue for so long and to affect so many. I can't give any satisfying reasons for that but I do think we can see God active not only as the God of Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Jacob, but as the God of Eliezer, Hagar and Ishmael.

We have seen in our own days of pandemic, political turmoil, serial shortages and unrest, that it isn't just the best that has come out in people. Not even God's people. Our Christian faith has not rendered us immune to making errors of judgment and taking actions that hurt people around us. We are known to nod ascent to God's promises and make our own Plan B when they sound too good to be true.

So often we choose to learn from the errors of our ways, ignoring those who have gone before us and insisting we are somehow different, immune to the same faults. And so we

repeat mistakes we don't have to make. But we should see that God's grace covers this stubbornness and shortsightedness.

We should see that Abram's faith is not credited to him once it's perfected but when it is tender, susceptible as any of ours is to peaks and to valleys. And we should see that again and again the patience of God surpasses the patience of Job. God gives perspective to Abram much as God did to Job. *Count the stars, if you are able*, God says, knowing full well this man can't even see but a fraction of them.

We are never so patient with God as God is with us. God's grace is respectful of our limitations. As we receive it, we should respect them as well. God is God. We are not. A truth that can confound, yes, before it comforts. But a truth that is timeless for times such as these.

Thanks be to God.