

Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent

February 28, 2010

Texts: Genesis 15:1-2, 17-18; Philippians 3:17 – 4:1; Luke 13:31-35

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Abram was having an existential moment. He'd come off some great lifetime highs. He and his wife Sarai had come from Ur, spent time in the land of Haran that is central Turkey today, and following the urging of God whom Abram scarcely yet knew, again moved on, seeking new horizons in Canaan. Along the way he'd nurtured flocks of sheep and goats into a large holding, and taught his nephew Lot the work of a pastoral semi-nomad. Life was good.

Life was good even when Abram, Sarai, and Lot had to travel to Egypt as the result of drought and famine, and while there had an unpleasant misunderstanding with the Pharaoh about Sarai. The Pharaoh thought Sarai was beautiful and assumed she was single. Abram had to break the news that she was unavailable. Married, actually. It was awkward all around and the Pharaoh felt apologetic enough to offer Abram safe conduct out of the country with Sarai and all his livestock. A less fortunate guy would have been killed.

Life continued to be so good that Abram set Lot up independently in business and let him stay in the rich pastures of Canaan while he moved on again. Lot pretty promptly got himself captured by a regional king in a territorial dispute and had to be rescued. Abram by then had a big retinue of family and servants, some 300 of whom he gathered into an army. The minor king was vanquished; Lot was rescued. There was some loot from the battle, but Abram took none of it, only his red-faced nephew, and the women, children, servants and livestock that were Lot's. Abram didn't need any loot. His life was good.

But now, after all this success in matters of personal wealth, lifetime goals met, and clan management, Abram was having, as I said, an existential moment. By which I mean that deep down in his soul he knew that something just wasn't coming together for him. Even though he had everything a man could want. Even though God had told him on several previous occasions that he and his future generations were to inherit and inhabit all of Canaan. Life was good, but still something was badly wrong.

Up 'til then Abram had been happily running his business empire; busily caring for Sarai and all the others. He'd been distracted with dreaming about the best grazing land and the amusing complications of moving hither and yon. But in this moment *it came to him* - the chief problem of his existence - and when God again reminded him about how great the future was going to be he let loose on God about it. Abram said, what do you mean great? I've got *no* future. There's not one child of mine in this whole clan. It's all servants and the children of other men. None of them will carry on my name, so your promise is empty and pointless.

Abram's existential moment came about because he suddenly realized that for all his ambitions and accomplishments, he actually possessed nothing lasting. And if he possessed nothing, he *was* nothing. His very existence was nothing more than the temporary presence of his own degradable flesh and bone. Nothing of the present really belonged to him and he had no stake in the future either. It was enough to make a grown man weep piteously. And perhaps he did.

In his misery Abram at first missed God's words of hope and promise, "*Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield, your reward will be very great.*" With the words, **I am your shield**, God said to Abram, *you belong to me*. Abram, as a grown man, still was learning about this mysterious God whom he followed. Though Abram felt God's presence and was led by God, he had never realized that he *belonged* to God, nor the implication of that belonging. Before it was all about Abram being everyone else's shield. Abram was the protector, the one on whom everything depended. All his hope was in himself. Now Abram realized that while he had nothing, God had his back. God stood by him, protected him, and was the source of all good in his life.

It was true that nothing really belonged to Abram, because every thing belongs to God and comes to us through God. One of our grand human illusions is that we are entirely self-made. And when we fail we are devastated. So God's words to Abram are important for us to hear. God insisted that Abram and Sarai would have a child of their own and future generations to come. At that point, stripped of the idea of himself as a self-made man, re-adjusting his notion of hope, *Abram believed God*. And God *reckoned it to him as righteousness*. Seeing Abram's helplessness, God loved him and accepted his trembling faith, saying, *I can work with that*. And forever onward Abram knew and trusted a greater good than himself.

God's pronouncement of Abram's righteousness gives us something to ponder in Lent's season of self-examination and acts of almsgiving. Righteousness is not about us always knowing and doing the right and good thing, but about being rooted in God and letting God do what is right and good through us. This means paying way more attention to God's way of doing things than to our own strategies for what we think is good and right. And it means giving God enough of our fainting hearts and trembling strength for God to say, *I can work with that*.

But ah, dear Abram. He suffered from yet another malady, as has all humankind then and now. We think, we *believe*, that our present defines our future. But God would have us know that it is really God's future that defines everything.

Jesus knew this. It's why he could speak so confidently: "*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 Jerusalem.*" Jesus was not afraid of what would happen in Jerusalem because he lived from God's future, not from his present reality with all its frights and perils. He knew that there was nothing that could happen in Jerusalem that God could not put right, working the salvation of the world through the cross. Terrible as they are, a wrecked economy, ill health, war, injustice, and our rejection of one another personally and spiritually...our present struggles go to the cross with Jesus and give way, as death did on the third day, to God's future.

It remains a puzzle to some why God would right the world's deep wrongs through his Son's poured-out life. But not to those who like Abram are moved to say in the midst of a painful present, "I believe". Paul explained our faith this way: "*He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself*". I think Paul could have said it more simply though. Maybe like this: God is prepared to raise up all that we lay down. *Amen*.