

Second Sunday of Lent
Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18 Philippians 3:17--4:1 Luke 13:31-35
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
March 13, 2022 [Traditional]

The reading from Genesis is this strange, kind of gory episode, where God commands Abraham to kill a cow and a goat and a couple of birds. God tells him to cut the cow and the goat in half, and to put the halves across from each other, so there's a path between them. Then when night comes, and Abraham falls asleep, this eerie, supernatural thing happens: A smoking pot and a flaming torch pass between the pieces of the animals. God walks through the bloody gap between the severed parts.

As weird as this episode is to us in 21st century America, it tells us something really awesome about God. In 2000 B.C. in the Middle East, if you and I made a covenant agreement with each other, we might use this ritual to seal the deal. Let's say your family and my family have been fighting each other for 50 years...the Shepherds and the Grangerfords. After years of fighting, we decide it's time to put an end to the feud. There shall be no more acts of revenge between our families; the cycle of violence ends here. To seal our agreement, we might use this ritual act from today's first reading. I make my promises to you, and then I walk through the severed halves of these animals. What does it mean? Well, I'm saying (ritually) that if I break the promise I just made to you, then I would deserve the fate of these animals. If I prove untrue to my promises, you could rightfully tear me in half. There's nothing magic about the ritual itself. I'm just sealing my promise to you with a visible sign.

This is what's going on in our first lesson, between Abraham and God. As strange as it is to us, the symbolism does make sense. What makes it crazy is *who* makes the pledge. Abraham has come to a crisis in his life. God has promised him children, and that he will have a land of his own. Problem is: nothing has happened, and Abraham and Sarah are getting old. Abraham is starting to have doubts: "Is God going to be true to his promises? Was he just teasing me with these great visions?" Abraham is standing here with nothing whatsoever to show for his faith in God. And he's taken a lot of risks. He's left his homeland and all his supports behind, to follow God's command. And now he's back to square one.

And it's here in Abraham's barren, hopeless emptiness that God answers. "Look up at the sky, Abraham: your descendants are going to be a multitude, like those stars. You will possess the land that I have promised you. I am opening up an amazing future for you and your descendants." And then God seals his promise to Abraham with the sign. He walks between the slaughtered animals. This is *God* we're talking about. The creator of galaxies, the origin of all life. Here he is binding himself to this particular man. "I—the Almighty Creator of all things—will be torn in half before I let anything get in the way of the beautiful future that I want for you." And look: Abraham is not asked to make any promises back to God. God just says, I will come through on this for you if it tears me in half. The only thing Abraham can do is *believe*. All he can do is trust God's word.

We *will all* find ourselves in Abraham's situation at some point in our lives. We come to those crisis situations, where our basic convictions are tested. And you know, sometimes we deserve our crises. We bring them on ourselves. I mean, how many of us have kept on engaging in a destructive habit even though all it did was hurt us more and more? How many times do we take the easy road and lash out at people, instead of taking the extra time and effort to listen to people and meet them where they're at? How many times do we just let a bad situation in our family get worse and worse, without facing it, saying what needs to be said, doing what needs to be done?

Jesus is pleading with us in the gospel reading: "How often have I desired to gather you under my wings, like a hen gathers her chicks, but you are not willing! So now you're left with the house *you've* created for yourself." God loves us with that mother hen love. All he wants to do is shelter us, protect us, keep us warm and safe and close to him. Like a mother hen. But we don't go to him. We want to hide in the shelter of self-sufficiency we've built for ourselves. And that shelter is about as strong as a cardboard box in the end. Sometimes we deserve our crises.

Other times, we're like Abraham in today's first lesson. And that's when it's *really* tough. We can't point to anything in particular we've done wrong. It just seems like we're getting gut-punched. Like, there's an accident, or a sickness...someone we love dies suddenly. A person we trusted turns out to be not so great. These are the crises that are hardest for us to handle. At least when we know we *deserve* the bad situations we get ourselves into, we know in the back of our minds we *could* do something about them. But when there seems to be no reason for the suffering: that's when we call God into question the most.

And there is no easy answer when we face those times. Abraham's faith in God is the hardest faith of all. Because that kind of faith is often just standing there mptyhanded, with nothing to show for itself. Abraham, the first of our faith, stood in a strange land, with no possessions, tired and worn-out with struggling; the future that he had been led to hope for, looked absolutely impossible at times. But he said, "I believe." That's the hardest kind of faith. God did not fulfill his promises to Abraham quickly. But he gave him a sign of his promise. "I'll be torn in two before anything gets in the way of the future I have in store for you."

And of course, about 2,000 years after Abraham, we come to the cross of Jesus Christ. That tree of death and suffering is where God went all the way, once and for all, with what he said to Abraham and his descendants. For all the times we did not listen to him, for all the times we avoid his call to let go of our lives and go to him and take shelter under his wings—it's God who has been torn apart. That's how passionately he loves us and calls out to us and pursues us. Hopefully, knowing that about him will be enough to break our proud hearts so that we can listen and repent before our cardboard house tumbles down.

And when life is not fair, when our loved ones die, when evil strikes out of nowhere, when we're sick, when nothing makes sense...the cross again is our sign. The cross is the

only thing that makes sense. We can trust a God who is torn apart on a cross, because here is a loving Father who in some mysterious, unfathomable way knows what it is to be trapped in a situation which is downright unfair. Remember, Jesus was tried unjustly. God experienced that. He suffers injustice. He is struck down by evil, he weeps when his children die. He knows our feeling of abandonment. He knows death. He will share in our death...your death and mine. So we don't stay in a state of victimhood. We go right to God when nothing is fair; we know he's been there, that he is right there suffering with us. And we say to him, "this is where you bring light out of darkness."

He gives me that sign to hold onto. That cross, from one angle, looks so terrible, so hopeless, so senseless, so violent and cruel. But it has become the sign of my one and only hope. It has become the sign of a grace, and a love, and a joy, and a final victory beyond measure. And through Jesus, all of that is for me.

The One who was willing to get torn apart by *us* to fulfill his promise to *us*, is the One who lives today. He speaks to us, he has washed us clean in the water, he gives us his body and blood, reassures us, and walks with us. He lives in his people. These are the visible signs he gives us—signs we can hold on to and live by every day.

The truth is: in front of God, we're all just like Abraham. We're standing here empty-handed today. In front of God we have nothing to show for our struggles. There's nothing we can say or give back to him. And here he is, calling us to the feast, and giving us the kingdom!