

Second Sunday in Lent, Year C

February 28, 2010

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

### **Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18**

*{1}* After 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." *{2}* But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" *{3}* And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." *{4}* But 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." *{5}* He 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." *{6}* And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness. *{7}* Then he said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess." *{8}* But he said, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" *{9}* He 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." *{10}* He 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. *{11}* And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. *{12}* As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.... *{17}* When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. *{18}* On 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."

### **Psalm 27**

*{1}* The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? *{2}* When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh-- my adversaries and foes-- they shall stumble and fall. *{3}* Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident. *{4}* One thing I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple. *{5}* For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock. *{6}* Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the LORD. *{7}* Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me! *{8}* "Come," my heart says, "seek his face!" Your face, LORD, do I seek. *{9}* Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help. Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation! *{10}* If my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will take me up. *{11}* Teach me your way, O LORD, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies. *{12}* Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries, for false witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence. *{13}* I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. *{14}* Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!

### **Philippians 3:17-4:1**

*{17}* Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. *{18}* For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. *{19}* Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. *{20}* But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. *{21}* 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. *{4:1}* Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

### **Luke 13:31-35**

*{31}* At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." *{32}* He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. *{33}* Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' *{34}* Jerusalem, 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! {35} See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

At the risk giving two sermons, there is something in the first reading that really merits mention. The first reading is certainly strange and perhaps even a bit beautiful in its own way. All that stuff about cutting animals in two seems to be from an ancient covenant making ceremony. It was intended to symbolize that the parties were staking their honor and their lives on keeping it. It was sort of like saying, "May the same or worse happen to me if I fail to live up to this covenant." Presumably, since it takes two to make a covenant, I assume that both parties would have passed through the severed animals. Notice, however, that in the story related today, only *God* walks. God, unilaterally, takes on full responsibility for making sure that the covenant is kept. There is no indication that Abram was even expected to do the same. It is God who puts God's own life and honor at stake for the sake of the relationship with Abram. As Christians, of course, we believe that God's absolute commitment to the human race, no matter what the cost, came to fulfillment through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Lent can sometimes seem like a time when we have to "do things" for God, but this is a reminder that the best thing we can "do" is to live in gratitude for such "wondrous love" (from the hymn by that name: "What Wondrous Love is This"). In the words of another of my favorite hymns, "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."

Speaking of the first treading, in case you didn't notice, there are three verses missing, which, at least for me, change the whole sense. Now, without those verses and as we heard this reading, it is about a covenant that God makes with Abram and Abram's response. God is coming through big time for Abram: fame, fortune, and a long legacy. Why wouldn't he agree? He would be crazy not to. Sure, there might be a few doubts and rough spots along the way, but in the end, it would all be worth it. Abram could ride those things out with that jackpot in mind.

Listen, though, to those missing lines, which immediately follow verse 12, "As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a terrifying darkness descended upon him.": *Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years; but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and*

*afterward they shall come out with great possessions. As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation...*” (Genesis 15: 11-16a)

So, God made some big and bold promises, but *Abram was not going to be around to see their completion*. In fact, God’s promises did not even guarantee immunity from suffering, difficulty, mistakes, or uncertainty.

Why didn’t Abram just call it quits right there and then? Why bother, especially if God’s promise and presence wasn’t necessarily going to make life any better?

Hold on to that thought.

In St. Luke’s Gospel, Jesus began the journey to Jerusalem in chapter 9. Along the way he had been teaching, healing, and confronting annoyed religious leaders. In today’s story, those same leaders warned Jesus to “get out of Dodge” because things weren’t looking so good for Him. He should come up with other plans or a change of direction. Why didn’t He?

This may seem like a diversion, but stay with me. I’ve told this story before. In medieval times cathedrals could take hundreds of years to complete. One day a bishop went out to survey the construction and spoke to some of the workers. “What are you doing?”, he asked. “I’m cutting stones.”, was the reply. Another answered, “I’m putting up a wall.” Still another answered, “I’m digging a ditch.” As the bishop was leaving, a frail and insignificant looking person carrying a bucket and some metal cups crossed his path. The bishop asked, “What are you doing?” “I’m building a cathedral.”, was the reply.

The reason that Abram and Jesus could continue on, despite the fact that the immediate future didn’t look too bright, was that each of them had some sense of the “bigger picture”, of how what they did fit into God’s plans for the world. Each received a “glimpse”. Today we heard about Abram’s and two weeks ago, on Transfiguration Sunday, we heard about Jesus’.

My guess is that, like most of us, most of the time Abram and Jesus walked more by faith than by sight (see 2 Corinthians 5: 7). That’s the way it is.

The most discouraging and demoralizing times for any of us tend to be when life becomes a series of disconnected tasks without any seeming meaning, direction, or purpose. Those are the times when it becomes all too easy to quit or to make some really bad choices.

Lent is, among other things, a time to ask the “big questions” like: “Who am I?”, “Where am I heading?” It is also a time to regain a sense of direction and purpose.

So, feel free to “ask away”, but don’t necessarily expect that things will, all of a sudden and always, become clear. Much of the time it is a matter of trust and obedience.

Most importantly, however, may this Lent be a time to be reminded that, because of God’s covenant with us through Holy Baptism, we already are part of God’s “bigger picture”, no matter who we are and what we happen to be doing at any particular moment. From God’s perspective, all of us are already building one great big cathedral, even when we don’t realize it.

It’s not always easy and certainly not always clear. Sometimes we make mistakes or wander off. But, like a mother hen, God will always gather the wayward chicks under her nurturing wings.

Let us pray. God has created me to do some definite service; God has committed some work to me which has not been committed to another. I have my mission...I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. God had not created me for naught. I shall do good. I shall do God’s work. I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place while not intending it—if I do but keep God’s commandments. Therefore, I will trust. Whatever, wherever I am, I can never be thrown away. If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve; in perplexity, my perplexity may serve; if I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve. God does nothing in vain, God knows what God is about. (Prayer by John Cardinal Henry Newman, slightly adapted)

AMEN.