

The Reverend Beth Lind Foote
2nd Sunday in Lent, Year C
February 24, 2013
Genesis 15: 1-12, 17-18
Psalm 27
Philippians 3: 17-4:1
Luke 13: 31-35

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be
always acceptable in your sight, our Lord and our Redeemer.
Amen.*

I am “home alone” this weekend. My husband and older daughter are both adult support staff at the diocesan youth event “Happening #30” which started on Friday night and finishes up this afternoon. Hale is a very brave man to sleep on the floor for two nights as a chaperone. But Happening is an event like no other---it’s the closest thing the Episcopal Church has to a revival meeting---the energy is high. I think we should all send Hale and Happening our prayers this morning.

All joking aside, Happening is a once a year “Cursillo” event run by youth for youth that creates a safe community in which kids can let down their guard and explore their faith. Trinity hosted Happening in 2010 and I got an inside view as the “Happening” Chaplain. Throughout the weekend, the teen leaders give “talks” about their relationship with God. Our passage from the Old Testament is one of the oldest and most foundational stories in the Bible, and yet its intimacy and mystery reminds me of those Happening talks.

Abram left the City of Ur to a new land that God promised. But Abram is getting on in years, and is without an heir, and without an heir, Abram is essentially broke, and it causes him to question God. In our passage today, God comes to Abram again in a vision and promises him a great reward. Abram responds with a reality check, “hey God, what is that reward again? What do you mean? I could really use just one heir.”

Then God brought Abram out of what must have been his tent, where he was the boss, and takes him out under the dark night sky where, of course, where we all feel a sense of the infinite. There God delivers those amazing words, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them...So shall your descendents be.” And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.”

For a moment out there under the stars, Abram believes and “gets it.” But then Abram doubts, and wants another sign!

God is patient with Abram and that evening makes an overwhelmingly definite sign in the dark, mysterious Covenant ceremony. But to do so, God essentially puts Abram under, into a deep sleep. Like so many of us, God speaks to us in dreams.

Perhaps God sees that is the only way Abram can understand what God is doing, by communicating on a subconscious level.

Covenants are usually between two parties who agree to enter into a deal. But here we have God promising to give Abram countless descendants and the land. Abram does not pass through the pieces of the sacrificed carcasses to seal his end of the deal. Only God does. This Covenant is all a gift, not a two-way Covenant at all.

The trick is, is Abram truly able to receive it? His track record is not so great and the overall narrative of the Old Testament shows how the Hebrew people struggled to understand and receive this Gift of a special relationship with God, and wandered into a dense thicket of political and hierarchical entanglements.

Yet God's Covenant was still valid, and the generous gift of God's relationship was still there. Like the image of the stars in the night sky, God is beyond our imagining, and decided to take another tack to be in relationship with humanity.

Fast forward to our Gospel passage, where we see Jesus nearing the city of Jerusalem. The Pharisees warn Jesus that Herod wants to kill him. The Pharisees are like Abram, and like us, stuck on their day to day, political thinking. Jesus says “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!”

Jerusalem is the great city of the Temple, but for us, it can also be seen as the human condition, in all its complex and tangled mess. Jesus expresses God’s patient and sheltering love for us in the image of the hen gathering her brood under her wings.

There is more going on here with the mother hen than meets the eye. Everyone in those days lived side by side with chickens. Mother hens gather their chicks beneath their wings for warmth, and they also fight to protect their young. Mother hens are known

to stand up to predators, offering themselves instead of their chicks. So Jesus is the mother hen who longs to protect us under beneath his wings, but he is also the mother hen who is willing to defends us as our saviour.

The Mother Hen is a loving and powerful image of God's New Covenant with humanity, this time, in the person of Jesus.

Jesus seals the New Covenant in the "deep and terrifying darkness" of the events of Holy Week. In that once and for all event, God gives us the definitive sign that God is giving us all that God has: God's self who was born, lived, died, and was raised, for us. God takes us to the darkness, and triumphs over it, in the Resurrection. That is the glorious "work" that Jesus says he is going to finish, on the third day.

It is almost too much to receive. Are we able to hear this message? Or has it faded over time for us?

Lent is a time to prepare for opening ourselves to this gift of new life, a time of emptying and filling ourselves with spiritual refreshment. In these two stories we have images of overwhelming love: the starry night, and the Mother Hen. The task of Lent is to empty ourselves of what drags us down into the worldview of scarcity and “give me a sign,” so that we can fill our selves up to the brim with God’s love. Lent can be a “Happening” time for us to renew our faith, as well.

Jesus also gave us the Eucharist as a way to remember all that he did, and to make it part of our very being. Let us break bread together and savor the abundance of the New Covenant. Amen.