

Saint Matthew's/San Mateo Episcopal Church

Lent 1, March 13, 2022

READINGS:

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

Psalm 27

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Luke 13:31-35

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy: Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ your Son...”

Lent is a season of examination and repentance. It begins with Ash Wednesday's solemn reminder: “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return,” and with our acknowledgment of our failures to live the faith we profess, reciting together the Litany of Penitence.

Today our collect reminds us that though we from time to time (or even way too often) allow ourselves to be separated from God by sin, and to stray off from the Good Shepherd, God's glory is always to have mercy. Jesus is always going before us, walking beside us, and following us closely with his support and his love. He wants a relationship with us, and he is willing to follow his strays and bring them back into that relationship, time after time.

That theme of relationship shows up in every one of our scripture readings today!

In our reading from Genesis, Abram (he won't be Abraham, the father of many nations, until later on) is fearful that he will never have a natural child, and that

his slave Eliezer of Damascus will be his heir. God promises Abram that he will have his own heir, and that his descendants will be as many as the stars in the sky above. Abram believes God, our reading tells us, and God counts that belief and trust in him as an act of righteousness.

Then God promises to give Abram the land around him. Well. What does Abram do? He responds with, "How am I to know that I will possess it?" Eleonore Stump, Professor of Philosophy at St. Louis University, says this about Abram's question: "That doesn't sound like a trusting response, does it? If you promised to give me some CDs, and I said, "How do I know that you will give them to me?", you would be insulted, wouldn't you?"

But God wanted a relationship with Abram. Instead of stalking away in anger, he had Abram make a sacrifice, sent him a vision over that sacrifice, and once again made his promise. "To your descendants," he tells Abram, "I give the land from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates."

Abram struggled with trust in God. And, just when he did manage it, and got credit for it from God, he lost it again! But Abram's trust was precious to God. God counted it as righteousness, and he made a covenant with Abram, giving his descendants a homeland.

He made one with Noah, too, setting the rainbow in the sky as a sign that he would never again destroy the earth with a flood. He gave a set of rules to Moses to help his people stay in a right relationship with him. He sent the prophets to warn them, over and over, when they were on the wrong path. God kept trying, even when his people failed, even when they strayed away.

We have all heard a parent (or a teacher) say to misbehaving children, "Don't make me come down there!" Or, "Don't make me come in there," or "over there," or even "back there," if the trouble is happening in the backseat of the car. Seeing the mess his creation was in, God decided to do just that. He came to earth, not in anger, but in love. He sent his son Jesus to redeem his people from their sins and to bring them back into relationship with him.

In our reading from Luke today, some Pharisees come to Jesus to warn him that Herod wants to kill him, and to advise him to run away. Jesus refuses. He knows his identity as a prophet and as the Son of God. He tells the Pharisees to let

Herod know that he has work to do in the next days, and then he must be going on to Jerusalem and what awaits him there.

Next, Jesus uses an example from agriculture to help them understand the love with which he is going to Jerusalem. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often," he tells them, "have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" He explains the role of God as one of a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings to shelter them from the foxes and other dangers of the world.

We live today far from farming, and most of us have never seen a mother hen defending her chicks or her nest full of eggs. When we were kids, my mom used to tell us how fiercely the hens at her uncle's farm would defend their nests from children sent to collect eggs for breakfast. Often the hens would stare the egg collectors down, and even peck their hands viciously when they reached toward the nests.

Mother hens do the same if a fox or other predator gets in. They will not move from the nest, and the predator literally has to go through their bodies, killing them first to get to the eggs or chicks. In the rain or in a windstorm, the hens spread their wings and call to their chicks to shelter beneath them, and the chicks come running! Jesus laments that the people of Jerusalem (and us too), refuse the chance to live that he offers to all who follow him. Sometimes we seem not to have the sense God gave a baby chicken. But Jesus still keeps trying for that relationship with us, even when we fail, even when we stray away.

Saint Paul in his letter to the church at Philippi tells them (and us) that unlike the unwilling chickens with their minds set "on earthly things", those who follow Christ have a citizenship in heaven, safe beneath God's protecting wings. He calls them (and us too) to watch and follow those who follow Christ. "Join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us," he tells us. We may keep sinning and straying, but if we come running back when Jesus calls, and stand firm in him, he will shelter us from the storm, and he will return for us!

Lent is a season of examination and repentance for us. It is also a season to watch and follow, and to be better examples of the kingdom to those around us. In

Lent, the church calls us to increased attention to our relationship with God, “by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word,” as the Prayer Book Invitation to a Holy Lent puts it. This year, we have the opportunity as a parish to deny ourselves something in order to give the gift of animals from Heifer International to a neighbor in need of them. And critically needed dollars in support of Ukraine can be contributed through Episcopal Relief and Development. Beginning next Wednesday, we have the opportunity to study scripture for six weeks with our brothers and sisters in Bullhead City via Zoom. Probably, each of us has also “given up” or “taken up” an individual Lenten discipline. Good for us chickens!

I would like to close with a Franciscan blessing that seems very appropriate for the Lenten season:

“May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart. May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace. May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and turn their pain into joy. May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done. May the peace of God and the God of peace be with you for evermore.”

Amen.