

*Second Sunday in Lent*

March 16, 2019

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Luke. (Luke 13:31-35)

At that very hour, some Pharisees came and said to [Jesus], "Get away from here for Herod wants to kill you." 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. 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.' 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! 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.'"

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace and peace to you from peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The world seems a little darker today. We woke up Friday morning to discover that forty-nine, now fifty, people were gunned down in a mosque in New Zealand. This week saw a college scandal with rich parents exploiting their privilege. It saw more of the chaos of Brexit, and an airliner declared unfit. It saw teens crying out that we have only twelve years to halt climate change before it is too late.

Now, we could easily go down the rabbit hole of despair. The world is so broken. Every day there seems to be something else. We could easily find ourselves looking for villains to blame. "Those conservatives, they are so isolating." "Those liberals, they are just violent." "The internet, the white supremacists, the government, any government, they caused this." We could ring our hands and say, "How long?" Or, "Things will never change." We could. But we won't. We won't, because we are followers of Jesus Christ. And Christ calls us to live differently in this world.

Today, I look at the readings assigned for the day, and I see two different stories about people wanting the world to be better, of dreams that are as yet unrealized, and about learning to follow God's way in the world.

The first story is about Abraham. Abraham and Sarah. We know them. They are the faith mother and father of the Christians, the Muslims, and the Jews. Abraham and Sarah's story binds us together.

Abraham was seventy-five when he heard the promise of God. Well into retirement years, ready to slow down. But God said to him,

*“Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you . . . so that you will be a blessing.”*

So, Abraham — actually at that point it was Abram — Abram and Sarai go out from their family and their home with glorious dreams of a good land, a strong community, a healthy family to love. The world will be better. Life will be good. God will provide.

It's now been a long time since that call. About twenty years at this reading. There has been travel, there was a famine, political upheaval, refugee status, a deportation, a war, and a whole lot of quiet years in between. But there is no big family, no home, just a little bit of land. Plenty of dreams, but not a whole lot of evidence that they're ever going to come true.

Abraham is taken to walking at night under the stars. But in the vast expanse of sky remind him of the promise that he once heard. One night he looked up and hears the words,

*“Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. So shall your descendants be.”*

He hears,

*“To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.”*

Can he still believe it? Can he hear this one more time and still believe? How do you keep going when life doesn't look like you hope it will?

If we are to live differently in this world, if we are to hope when we can't see how it will come to pass, we have to tend to our lives of faith. We are not evil-fighting super heroes that can change the world in a weekend. We are children of God, living within God's promises. And those promises don't always happen when or how we want them to. So, we have to keep listening and keep watching. We must tend to our lives of faith.

With that in mind, I would like to offer a couple practices for tending our lives of faith.

The first is this:

Be regular in prayer — whether it is walking under a night sky, getting lost in writing, reading the psalms (which are all prayers) or pouring our hearts out to the one who knows us and loves us. We need to be in regular prayer. And we need to listen. Just listen. Listen for those words that will guide us as the promises of Abraham did. *“Count the stars, Abraham, so shall your descendants be.”* That's one.

The second practice is to gather regularly, as we do, to give thanks and to share the sacraments. In this place, we practice the hard work of humility, loving, and service. That is the only defense against destructive hate. But it is hard to maintain. We need sustenance. We need support. We need the community of faith to walk alongside, and to carry the weight when it is too much for us.

A third practice is to remember the sabbath day. Just rest some time. It feels like there's so much happening, and we can't stop, and we can't give in. But even God rested. Rest lets us function well, and not be reactionary.

And, finally, give thanks and praise, even on dark days. This shifts us from an attitude of fear to an attitude of trust. The One we praise is to be trusted with the future. The One we praise can be trusted with our community's wellbeing. The One we praise is faithful to all generations, even this one. Even when we are unsure of the future, we can praise the One who holds it.

Someone pointed out to me recently that when Abram died at one hundred and seventy-five years, he really had very little. In fact, all he had was a piece of land and a son. All he had was what God had promised him so long ago. God is faithful. And as we live in trust, we can live differently in the world.

I said earlier that there were two stories about people wanting the world to be better, and learning to find and follow God's ways. The second story is found in the Gospel. Jesus is on a long, slow journey to Jerusalem. The end is coming. He has worked so hard to bring good news, to heal, to teach, to help people enter into this life, into this love of God.

But it is so hard. The world is so broken. It feels like nothing will ever change. So here along the way Jesus stops and weeps.

*"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!"*

It is hard. People won't listen. People won't change. And still Jesus goes on. Still he is willing to go to Jerusalem, to suffer and to die for those children who won't understand. Still he is willing to forgive instead of seek revenge. Still he is willing to give mercy instead of judgments. Still he is still willing to offer life instead of death.

If God's promises take so long, and the world is so broken and hard to change, how do we keep going? How do we work to support the promise and not work against it? How do we live in this meantime?

Again, I would like to offer a few practices. Before they were practices to tend our lives of faith. This time I offer practices to tend our world as we live toward God's promises.

The first practice is forgiveness. Set aside resentment and vengeance. Break the cycle of hurt, responding with hurt, responding with another hurt, to give yet another hurt, until we have an arms race. Getting even is not the way of Christ. Forgive because we are people who have been forgiven.

The second practice: Endless generosity. We do not live in scarcity. God provides for us, and we can provide for others: material goods, time, compassion, forgiveness. All the things we've been given we can generously give to others.

Third. Practice hospitality. In two weeks, we as a congregation will begin making space for a small church of Ethiopian Christians, who will gather in the East Lounge on Sunday afternoons. They do not look like us. They do not speak like us, or eat like us. But they are our brothers and sisters. And so we welcome them in the name of Christ – graciously, and wholeheartedly, and willing to learn from them.

And the fourth practice is to practice being a blessing. In your neighborhood and city and world, practice being a blessing. There are many ways to be a blessing. Rich and poor, powerful and vulnerable, all can be a blessing. Republicans have one way to be a blessing. Democrats another. Both are needed. Many acts of kindness, many acts of justice, many people making a difference in the world. Find a way. Find a way to be a blessing, even on the days you would rather weep

The world feels dark today. There is death and disfunction around us. But we are held in the faithfulness of God. We trust the promise that God is leading us into a good future, filled with life and hope.

In the meantime, we can live differently. We can tend to our faith and tend to the world, as we wait in hope for the Easter promise.

Amen.