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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, March 13, 2022

2nd Sunday in Lent/Year C

First Reading: Genesis 15:1-2, 17-18

Second Reading: Philippians 3:17-4:1

Gospel Reading: Luke 13:31-35

Sermon Title: “Children of the Heavenly Father”

Theme

Though we sometimes doubt and often resist God’s desire to protect and save us, our God persists. In holy baptism, God’s people have been called and gathered into a God-initiated relationship that will endure. Lent provides the church with a time and a tradition in which to seek God’s face again. Lent provides another occasion to behold the God of our salvation in the face of the Blessed One who “comes in the name of the Lord.”

Texts:

First Reading: Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

¹After 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.” ²But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” ³And Abram said, “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” ⁴But 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.” ⁵He 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.” ⁶And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

⁷Then he said to him, “I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.” ⁸But he said, “O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?” ⁹He 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.” ¹⁰He 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. ¹¹And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

¹²As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.

¹⁷When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. ¹⁸On 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.”

Second Reading: Philippians 3:17--4:1

¹⁷Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. ¹⁹Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. ²⁰But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. ²¹He 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.

Gospel: Luke 13:31-35

³¹At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to [Jesus,] “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” ³²He 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. ³³Yet 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.’” ³⁴Jerusalem, 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! ³⁵See, 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.’”

Sermon

It was one year ago exactly, liturgically speaking, the second Sunday in Lent last year, that I preached the second installment of the Five Major Covenants God made with his Chosen People, the Israelites, the Abrahamic Covenant. Weirdly enough, that covenant shows up in today's First Reading too.

1. The promise of land
2. The promise of descendants
3. The promise of blessing and redemption

You will recall that the contents of the covenant God made with Abram, not yet Abraham, included 1) The promise of land, 2) the promise of descendants, and 3) the promise of blessing and redemption.

In the first part of the First Reading, Abram recounted his dilemma of having no offspring. God told him to look up toward heaven and count the stars because that is how many descendants he will have. And in the second part, there is a grisly description of how they sealed the deal. I guess God couldn't have reached a hand down and shook Abram's, so they butchered some animals and God sent a smoking pot and a flaming torch between them. But not to worry, it was only a vision, no animals were harmed in the making of this covenant.

Please don't get bogged down in the details, because none of this matters for our sermon time today. The only part of the story that matters is God's faithfulness to Abram. God said God was going to do something, and it was going to be HUGE, and Abram ⁶"believed the LORD, and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness," meaning that God considered Abram righteous because he believed that God would do what God said.

The Gospel Reading is from Luke chapter 13, and by that time, Jesus had already made his decision to make his way to Jerusalem and meet his destiny, but according to Luke's Gospel, Jesus went through one town and village after another, preaching and teaching, and performing signs and miracles as he made his way to Jerusalem. And in one town, some Pharisees came up to him to warn him that Herod wanted to kill him. As you heard, Jesus was not to be threatened. He had holy work to do and nothing was going to prevent him from getting it done. Oh, and Jesus knew that

nothing would happen to him outside of Jerusalem, because Jerusalem was where prophets are killed. You see, Jesus knew his destiny.

But that didn't make him happy about it. Those of us who are parents know something about this. We raise our children to live responsibly and do the right thing, and sometimes they do, and sometimes they don't. Just like their parents.

The Pharisees got Jesus thinking about Jerusalem and we can just imagine him gazing off in its direction, and just like a parent, say out loud,

³⁴Jerusalem, 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!

Jesus was crystal clear about his mission. He was also laser-focused on it. He knew how it was going to turn out. In his human nature, he knew the betrayal and abandonment, the shame and humiliation, the torture and death he would face, and yet, at that moment, knowing all that, his preeminent concern was Jerusalem, and not Jerusalem the city, but Jerusalem the people. How he had hoped against fate that things would have turned out differently.

When Jesus lamented over Jerusalem, it was because he loved his creation and especially his Heavenly Father's Chosen People, the Jews, and yet they were so stiff-necked that they would not listen to him, be taught by him, and therefore may miss out on the "citizenship in heaven" that the apostle Paul wrote about.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

At his Ascension, Jesus commanded his apostles to baptize and teach his way of godly living. Today we, in the Lutheran church, make a big deal out of baptism because it is arguably the beginning of the Christian's life of obedience and the initiation rite to the church, the body of Christ. Baptism is all about God's claim on us. Baptism has nothing to do with our accepting Jesus as our personal Lord and Savior. Jesus won salvation for all on the cross two millennia ago, and the only decision we have to make is to believe it as righteousness as Abram did - or not – that is our only choice.

About baptism, Martin Luther wrote, Baptism "brings about forgiveness of sins, redeems us from death, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe it, as the words and promise of God declare." (Luther's Small Catechism)

The church has called baptism a covenantal relationship – covenantal, meaning it is a quid pro quo relationship. We become children of God, Christ becomes our brother, and we become members of the body of Christ, the church. We are given the hope of salvation and become inheritors of the kingdom of God. In exchange, we promise to do our level best to live a godly life, trusting that even when we fail, the grace of God in Christ Jesus will cover our failures. Pretty good deal on our part, wouldn't you say?

But wait, there's more! While that good news should inspire us all the more to learn our lessons and lead godly lives – to "be conformed to the body of his glory" as the apostle Paul wrote, God's claim on us is irreversible. It is inconceivable to think that God's will won't be done?

In the covenant of baptism, we can be assured that God will be faithful to us. God will fulfill God's part to bring our citizenship in heaven to completion. And that should inspire us to want to fulfill our part.

In the Prayer of the Day we sent up moments ago, we used the words, "gather" and "shelter" because in that prayer, we remind God of the covenant God has made with us, and we Christians sincerely pray that God in Christ does indeed "gather" and "shelter" us, and all creation, because we're fooling ourselves if we think we are smarter than previous generations and "everlasting life" is something we can acquire on our own.

The Hymn of the Day is "Children of the Heavenly Father" and the second verse speaks to what I am saying. Let us make it our prayer.

Prayer

God his own doth tend and nourish,
in his holy courts they flourish.
From all evil things he spares them,
in his mighty arms he bears them.

Let it be as you have said, LORD. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen