

Sermon: Lent 2

The Rev. Mike Wernick

February 21, 2016

Year C

Genesis 15:1-12,17-18

Psalm 27

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Luke 13:31-35

Today's lectionary starts out with a story of childlessness... and a promise that would extend throughout the generations... carried through a man's offspring... his own offspring... they would become more numerous than the stars... yet his wife is infertile...

In the Epistle... the lectionary reminds us that the mind can be set on earthly things... that glory can sometimes be sought in what turns out to be shame...

The Gospel affirms Jesus' commitment to his work... even when some Pharisees warn him of Herod's plan to kill him... it reminds me of *our* call to do God's work... the *need* to do God's work... even when the ways of the world seek to frustrate that work... or impugn that work... or sabotage that work...

Today's lectionary may be about the tension between barrenness and fruitfulness...

When God told Abram that his descendants would be too numerous to count... he reminded God... as if God didn't already know... that he continued childless... the text doesn't specifically say... but I'm confident that he believed the fault lie with Sarai... that she must be flawed... she must be barren... but let's remember that two thousand years ago... when medical care was less advanced... when day to day life was far more challenging... when proper nutrition may have been harder to come by... that carrying a child to full term was less common than it is now... and *even* now... I know a woman pastor in this synod who at 27 weeks she was put on total bedrest... the pregnancy was difficult... but her son was delivered several weeks ago...

When I think about barrenness... it takes some work for me to think about the man's role... we now know through medical science that difficulty in a couple's pregnancy might lie with the man... men don't like think about that... it challenges thousands of years of male bravado... but if it takes two to tango... it also takes two to be fruitful...

Then there's this cryptic piece in today's Jewish scripture... Abram had just asked God for some evidence of God's good faith... *O Lord God, what will you give me...* and as instructed... Abram brings the animals and cuts them in two... and then a deep and terrifying darkness descends on Abram... some clergy colleagues suggest that so committed was God to God's word... that this passage may be a liturgical covenant... God may be saying... *If I don't honor this covenant... may I be like these animals cut in two...* and the deep and terrifying darkness that descended would be life without God... in other words... God would not... could not... go back on God's own Word... God's Word is faithfulness itself... and when Abram trusted God... that's why God reckoned it to him as righteousness... God's Word was not barren... but fruitful...

But what else does it mean to be barren... when barrenness is not just about childbearing... it may also include the challenges we face in life... the difficulties... the times when things don't unfold seamlessly... the times when there are speed bumps... when things don't go our way... a little bit of cancer... a rejection letter for a job... or any other mountains over which we must travel... and if we realize that being barren is not just about childbearing... then we also have to ask how both genders contribute to it... and how we can all contribute to fruitfulness...

Jonathan Sacks... the former chief rabbi of Great Britain... wrote about something that's been on my heart lately... in his latest book [Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence](#) ... he makes the case that human beings are tribal by nature... he wrote that we need groups to survive... it's built into our evolution to identify with groups... we're divided into different nations... languages... cultures and codes... and these are the basics of identity...

There is no such thing as *humanity in the abstract* ... just as there is no such thing as language or literature or love in the abstract... identity is inescapably plural... it divides the world into Us and Them.

But Doug Kindschi... the Executive Director of the Kaufman Institute picked up on the rabbi's theme of tribalism... and wrote: but this division often leads to violence formed from fear of the other... and as Pastor Nadia said... perfect fear casts out love... fear leads to rejection of the stranger in our midst... it violates the basic teachings of all of our religions as well as a common sense of decency... it leads us to reject the immigrant and the refugee...

The story of leaving one's land and going to another strange land is a common one in many religious traditions. Abram is told by God... *Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you*... then there was a severe famine in that land... so Abram went down to Egypt to reside there as an alien... that's when Abram tried to pass Sarai off as his sister so he wouldn't be killed... similarly Joseph took Mary into Egypt for fear of violence from Herod... they were also refugees leaving their home... these scriptures and the Qur'an... all affirm welcoming the stranger as our responsibility...

And we live in a continuum of responsibility... I may be responsible for what I choose to eat for lunch... I may be responsible for getting stranded on the highway when I repeatedly fail to heed a "check engine" light... I may be responsible for bodily dis-ease when I eat too much and don't exercise enough...

But in larger things... there's more corporate responsibility... we may never be able to know for example... just exactly how things unfolded in Flint... how the water became so poisonous... we may never know who knew what when... and who said what to who when... even though we may say Governor Snyder is responsible... as governor... we cannot say it's him alone... there is a system which supports him... a system made up

of people... some of whom have their own agendas or motivations... some who fail to communicate clearly... and some who don't want to communicate... but we have elected many of them... and we're responsible for the laws they pass...

Jesus said that a prophet can't be killed outside of Jerusalem... Jerusalem represented the center of things... the happening place... in the boondocks... in the country... people were more concerned with survival than with what was happening in the distant power centers of their day... they just went about their lives... but in the Jerusalems of our world... in the Lansings... the Washingtons... and the Londons... in the power centers and the monied places... people are more concerned with other people's lives... because it's through them that they remain in power... like bread and circus...

In Jerusalem... Jesus was upsetting the apple cart of politics... he was calling its leaders to be accountable... not to Rome... but to God... and they disliked being questioned because they didn't want to be held accountable... Jesus was tightening the connection between accountability and community... but power and vulnerability tend to be mutually exclusive... watch Brene' Brown's video on vulnerability...

In our time... we're experiencing the tension... between barrenness and fruitfulness... we're being called to be reckoned as righteous... and perhaps... in this tension... this week... Pope Francis implied that building walls... was not Christian... I have to say I think he's right... there's nothing I can find in scripture to support walls... to support division over unity...

And this week... it was almost as though some advisors came to the Pope and said... be careful... Trump thinks you're disgraceful because of what you said... and the Pope replied... *Go and tell that fox for me... listen... I reject the division and accusation of the world... and I am building bridges... but I must be on my way... because it's impossible for a Pope to be killed outside of Washington... Washington... Washington... the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! We send you our dreams...*

but you kill our hope... I have often desired to gather your visionaries together... as a hen gathers her brood under her wings... but you were not willing to allow me...

When there is any kind of infertility... any thing that fails to produce or promote life... it's something that must be addressed... not by pointing fingers at each other... but collectively... and as we travel on our Lenten paths... it's not through our own efforts... but through the transformation of God in Christ within us... through the love and welcome that God offers us... that our welcome comes... and as Rabbi Sacks put it... *Can we recognize God's image in one who is not in my image? If we are true to our faith traditions... we will welcome all...*

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