

Sermon for 17.3.19 Genesis 15. 1-12, 17-18; Ps. 27; Philippians 3.17-4; Luke 13.1-9. Second Sunday in Lent. Rev'd Jenny Simson

The Old Testament reading from Genesis is that profound story about the making of the first covenant between God and Abram.

In the passage there is the pattern of promise, objection and reassurance.

The promise of God, the objection of Abram and the reassurance of God.

The rhythm or pattern speaks about an intimate relationship between God and Abram and in today's passage there is an added component of a covenant ceremony that seals God's promise to give Abram the land of his promise.

The ceremony, using bisected animals, described in the reading, reflects an ancient practice in which the participants in a covenant oath, passed through the dismembered parts of the animals proclaiming a similar fate on themselves, if they disobeyed the terms of the agreement.

Interestingly the Hebrew term for "making" a covenant is literally to "cut" a covenant.

We still use the term today although the word "covenant" has generally been replaced by the word "deal" - and I'm sure many of us have heard the term, *to cut a deal*.

Although I'm not sure many of us know its historic origin— perhaps we wouldn't use the term if we did.

The covenant in today's story was sealed between God and Abram when God passed between the pieces of the animals in the form of fire.

The gospel story today from Luke takes us on another journey towards Jerusalem where Jesus will cut a new covenant.

In the story, Jesus is with many of his followers when he is told of a recent atrocity about how Pontius Pilate had murdered a group of Galilean pilgrims as they were making sacrifices in the temple.

The image of these Galileans lying amid the blood of their sacrificed animals is a graphic one. The disciples themselves were Galileans and the horror of the story would have shocked them deeply.

But Jesus shocks them further when he says, "Do you think that because these Galilean suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did."

Then Jesus tells them a second story, another example, again a tragedy from the local news, known to his hearers, about a tower that has fallen on innocent bystanders, killing eighteen of them.

He asks, “Do you think they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

According to common Jewish belief, painful experiences were signs of God’s judgments. Jesus here calls into question this popular belief that all misfortune is punishment for sin. He knows that the sun shines **on** good people **and** bad people, and it rains on both, the righteous and unrighteous too.

Jesus shows no sign whatsoever of hatred or vengeance when he is told of Pilates cruelty to this compatriots. He uses the examples to instruct the disciples on the deeper meaning of the Christian way, and he tells his followers that all need to repent, to be ready for whatever happens, lest they too perish.

Jesus uses the fig tree parable as a type of commentary on the relationship between God and humanity. The parable implies that God is patient, but his patience is not to be presumed upon.

On the one hand, writes theologian Robert Karris, this is a parable of compassion, which produces comfort in the disciple who stumbles along the Christian Way. On the other hand, it is a parable of crisis, which should light a fire under procrastinators and other unproductive disciples.<sup>1</sup>

In the parable the fruitless fig tree is given another chance, and it is not just left to produce fruit on its own. The gardener prunes it and fertilizes it. He cares for it and nurtures it. In other words, if the fig tree produces good fruit it will be the result of some real effort to ensure that the root of the tree can tap the source of its life.

Theologian and writer Evelyn Underhill, writes of the source of life and the fruit that is produced with its sustenance. She writes that the fruits of the Spirit are those dispositions as St Paul tells us, Love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness and temperance – all things the world most needs. They are those dispositions, those ways of thinking, speaking and acting, which are brought forth in us, gradually but inevitable by the presence of the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert J Karris, O.F.M. “The Gospel of Luke” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary; Student Edition*, Geoffrey Chapman; London. P705.

divine love in our soul. They all spring from that one source of life. That same root.<sup>2</sup>

And that is what the call to repentance is about, a call to turn to the source of nourishment and life so that the person - or the congregation- can be awakened to their true identity, their true vocation in the Incarnate one, who sets all creation free to be his body - his presence in the world.

Jesus message for us today is as relevant as ever.

We are given another chance to hear and act on his words:

*listen to me and follow me, he says - Turn, live, and bring life to others.*

The New Covenant has been cut with the blood of Jesus Christ –

His cross is central, because it guarantees the eternal and enduring presence of God in his world.

As the words of the hymn, *In the cross of Christ I Glory*, sing out:

*when the woes of life o'take us,  
hopes deceive and fears annoy,  
never shall the cross forsake us  
from it shines our peace and joy. ....*

The Lord be with you.

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<sup>2</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit*. Morehouse Publishing; New York. 2010. P13.