



SERMONS THAT WORK

Lent 2
Year C

God's Hidden Work in the World

[RCL]: Genesis 15:1-12,17-18; Psalm 27; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

While it may be hard to imagine what life for Abraham was like, or even whether he was only a patriarchal ideal in the Old Testament, a careful reading of the passage from Genesis connects us to him with a contemporary question: how can we see God's promises at work in the world and be sure of their fulfillment?

There is so much that makes us question God's promises that God's will is at work. The twenty-four-hour news cycle carries with it death, mayhem, and dishonesty, so much that we despair of anything ever being different. For Abraham, it was the despair of not having any offspring. While this may seem archaic, it was the faith of people that their offspring, their blood heirs, assured them of an identity and the promise of a future. That faith was also grounded in land, a place that would be theirs that could be passed on to their children. It was an agrarian faith that still exists in many parts of the world.

For many of us who read or watch events march across our TV and tablet screens, the question is, will there even be a better world for our children to inherit?

But God makes promises to each of us, and there are two that are particular to us as we observe the season of Lent. The first is that we are all children of Abraham, and therefore inheritors of the promise, a covenant that God will always be our God, and our lives will be bound together with each other and our Creator and Redeemer.

The second promise is the gift of Jesus, God's son, who is our assurance of salvation and life eternal. We are baptized into his death and resurrection, and we are reminded of that each Sunday when we hear "the unchangeable truth of [his] Word" (from today's opening collect) and then experience that promise when we partake of Jesus' risen body and blood at Communion.

Lent is a time of repentance, and we often take that to be a time for self-examination and renewal. The Gospel assures us of an encounter with the Divine as we do that and strengthens us to withstand the assaults of the enemies of the cross of Christ, as the letter of the Philippians tells us. A large part of our

Lenten repentance is the rejection of those enemies of the cross, avoiding the incessant focus on bad news and wicked and inept people.

St. Paul, author of Philippians, tells us to remember where our true citizenship is and where we expect our help to come from. Then we have to start living like we believe it as we encourage one another along the way. The early Christians were courageous people; they had to be. There is no reason we cannot imitate them.

Now, let us turn to the actions that help us imitate our Christian forbears as we struggle to free ourselves from the world's focus on chaotic living that leads only to death.

Jesus leads the way. In the Gospel reading from Luke for today, he is confronted with the fear of what Herod might do. There is no question that Jesus had already been seen as a threat to Herod's temporal power. Eventually, Herod will be so fearful of Jesus that he will avoid a direct confrontation and send him to Pilate to handle the problem instead.

Jesus stands his ground, assured that he is doing God's business, "casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow." Do you know that helping to feed others is casting out the demon of hunger and want? So whenever you provide a meal or some groceries for someone, you are rejecting the world's demonic tyranny that demands lower taxes often by reduced support for those among us who have no helper.

Do you know that when you offer prayer for someone who is sick, alone or overwhelmed, you reject the world's implicit message that only the strong and powerful will inherit? That whenever you listen, just listen, to someone who is trying to sort out a problem or recover from a broken relationship, you are offering pastoral care in the name of Jesus, who always takes time for his children, even when others reject them as hapless or hopeless.

Doing actions like these brings that prophetic hope to people who need it, and we do these acts in the firm conviction that by bringing the Good News to others, we are bringing God's promises into the world.

Here, in summary, are some best practices that help us to connect with God's promises as we wait the day of Christ's coming again in glory:

- 1) Connect yourself with a faith community that practices ministry to people outside of it as much as to those within it. Both are important, but vitality exists when the promises of God reach beyond the doors of a Church.
- 2) Look for opportunities to serve others. Ask God each day what the plan God has for you is – and be prepared to be surprised at what opportunities to minister to others come your way. If you are not able to volunteer outside of your home, perhaps you can arrange a phone visit or write a card to someone, so they know they are cared for.

- 3) Refuse to watch the news when it becomes disturbing to you. We are powerless over much of what happens, but we often let it take control of our lives, and we lose our focus when we do.
- 4) Search for stories of Good News. They are often in the feature section of newspapers (if you are still able to get one) or in feature stories on television. You have to look for them, but they are there, brimming with accounts of courage and leadership changing our world for the better.
- 5) Focus your charitable giving on things (or one thing) that you perceive is making an impact on the lives of others, including the world of nature that is under so much stress. You will feel a sense of connection with God's creation outside of your immediate sphere. You will also be helping to bring God's work into the world.

These suggestions are some ways you can help with what one of our former presiding bishops refers to as God's project. The more we become part of it in our mission and ministry, the more we see its unfolding.

Lent is a time to take heart, to bear one another's burdens with grace and care, to take care of ourselves so that we are strong for others, and to be witnesses to the promises made to Abraham, the patriarchs, matriarchs, and prophets who came before us. An old hymn summarizes it well:

God is working his purpose out,
 as year succeeds to year,
 God is working his purpose out,
 and the time is drawing near;
 nearer and nearer draws the time,
 the time that shall surely be,
 when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God
 as the waters cover the sea.

Ben Helmer has been vicar of St. James' since June of 2009. He has been ordained to the priesthood for 38 years. He was raised in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, graduated from Michigan State University and received his M. Div. from General Theological Seminary in New York. His wife, Jane, is a mostly retired horticultural writer and editor. They have two sons. Richard is a priest in the Diocese of California and Steven is a carrier pilot in the U.S. Navy. Ben has served churches in Northern Michigan, Western Kansas and West Missouri. He was also the staff officer for rural and small community ministries for the Episcopal Church from 1999-2005 when he retired. He and Jane were then invited to work in Louisiana for a year where Ben was a chaplain to clergy, diocesan staff, and caregivers and Jane worked as a volunteer following the ravages of Katrina. In June of 2007, Ben and Jane went to Guam for 18 months where Ben served as archdeacon for the Episcopal Church in Micronesia before returning to Missouri. The Helmers now live in Holiday Island, about 7 miles north of Eureka Springs, with their chocolate lab, Jessie.