

February 21, 2016 - Second Sunday of Lent

“Stuck in the Middle with You” - Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: Genesis 15: 1-12,17-18; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

During Lent, we are following Jesus on a journey of spiritual transformation. We began the journey on Transfiguration Sunday by talking about how the light of Christ actually makes us more aware of the darkness within ourselves and the evil in the world. By pointing to who we are becoming in Christ, we also begin to see where we are not Christ-like. Last week, we joined Jesus in the wilderness as he confronted the devil and temptation. There we saw that confronting darkness and evil draws us into a relationship with Jesus Christ such that his light shines in, through and around us.

When I was in seminary, my very conservative Christian History teacher introduced me to a very Lutheran idea - that Scripture reads you, as opposed to we read Scripture. He meant that if we are reading Scripture as God’s Word, then we are allowing ourselves to be transformed by Scripture, rather than trying to interpret Scripture according to our individualized, ego-driven agenda. I think there is a lot of truth to my professor’s words, and I would only change them in this way: the story of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit that we tell one another transforms and changes our community and us. And so we are following Jesus to the Cross and onward to the Resurrection by walking the path of these Lenten stories with him.

Today, we hear a strange story from the deep and distant past about Abraham, and Jesus’ words about Herod, and the Pharisees. Over the past couple of weeks, we have been talking about dualities - good and evil, Scripture and Satan, Jesus’ divinity and our humanity. Jesus, in his presence among us, does not always make everything happy and light and loving. The presence of God, by *our nature*, can create resistance and conflict, division and separation.

In one of the scariest verses of the Gospels, Jesus says,

*‘Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.*

*For I have come to set a man against his father,*

*and a daughter against her mother,*

*and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;*

*and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.’ (Matt 10:34-36)*

The iron and steel of the Word of God in the person of God’s Only Son is a powerful agent of separation, and that raises an important question for this week:

*What is being separated from what?*

I ask that question because Jesus makes it clear today he cares deeply about the Pharisees and Jerusalem. This is not about separating evil Jewish leaders and religious people from the good followers of Jesus, nor is it about the ‘right way’ to follow God and all those who are doing it wrong. If only things were so easy, yes?

No, what Jesus is calling Jerusalem and us back to today is God’s promise and covenant. If we are really honest with one another, are we really capable of knowing what is good and what

is evil, right and wrong? I would say we are able, after some serious experience with God and our humble position as God's created yet free beings on this planet, to begin to discern things as more good and less evil, more right and less wrong - but very little, if anything, breaks out into black and white measures of right and wrong, good and evil.

This is the insight we gain at this moment of our journey, our ability to discern and understand is not as clear as we think it is. The Pharisees believe they are doing the right thing by warning Jesus about Herod's desire to kill him. The Pharisees also believe they know the good and cannot do evil. Herod believes he is doing the right thing for the empire. He is crazy, but he is also an appointed leader of the Roman Empire. Whatever serves the empire is good and right. Herod and The Pharisees, at this point in their political and religious history, have become the people to whom the Prophet Isaiah says,

*Ah, you who call evil good*

*and good evil,*

*who put darkness for light*

*and light for darkness,*

*who put bitter for sweet*

*and sweet for bitter!*

*Ah, you who are wise in your own eyes,*

*and shrewd in your own sight! (Is 5:20-21)*

In a time in our history where politicians and pundits and religious leaders want to push their own agendas onto us, how likely is it that Isaiah is also speaking to us today?

Jesus, though, does not challenge the Pharisees on the level of right and wrong, good and evil. We are further down the road than that on our Lenten journey. Deeper things are going on now. Jesus refers to Jerusalem's history with the prophets, which is to kill them. Think for a moment, though, about what the Prophets primarily call the people to. The concern of the prophet is not so much right and wrong, good and evil, as much as it is God's covenant and promise to the people God loves. Prophets, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, call us back to God's loving promise, and this is what Jesus does today.

He knows Jerusalem will reject him. He knows the State has already rejected him. But Jesus also knows the people will welcome him on Palm Sunday with the words of God's promise,

*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!*

Jesus doesn't choose sides here. He does not choose the state and the empire; he does not empower the powers that be by playing by their rules of control and conformity. The work shall go on. He also does not choose the prevailing religion of the day, either; he does not empower the facile judgments of those who believe they are capable of deciding what is good and evil, right and wrong.

Instead, what is important to Jesus is what is important in our story with Abram today - the invitation to God's loving covenant. This is a very weird little story with Abram in Scripture, but it begins to show us why it is important that our journey begins with dualities and leads us into this separating and dividing situation Jesus speaks of today. Once we have deepened our relationship with God and Christ, we begin to see that our ability to discern, our ability to

understand the world around us has been compromised by the darkness within us and the evil of the world.

How deep does it go? How far does it extend? Think of the Deep Horizon oil spill several years ago in the Gulf of Mexico. Ocean scientists are still discovering the vast extent of how far the oil that leaked deep in the Gulf has gone. They are still discovering how much sea life was killed and destroyed in that disaster. The fisheries in the Gulf states are still devastated by it. But we have forgotten about it. It is no longer in the news and yet it is still there, deep under the ocean. This is the way it is with sin and evil. Once we understand how compromised we are in our capacity to discern God's presence, we begin to see how much help we need from God and Christ. This is where faith begins to arise. The Psalmist says,

*I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. (Ps 27)*

So what does faith rely upon when we become aware of our inability to understand or discern things in the world? God's covenant and promise.

Once we are brought back to this understanding - God's loving covenant with his people through the work of Jesus Christ on the Cross and in the Resurrection - we see, as Abram does, that good and evil, right and wrong, state and religion, individual and community, human and divine, are all two sides of the same animal. In the separation caused by God's light, with all those things we place such value upon laying on either side of us, right down the middle of all those divisive ideas, decisions, understandings and ways of being comes the promise of God.

*When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire-pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram. (Gen 15:17-18)*

I treasure that the time of Lent makes me humble in its call to focus on our interior life of faith. I am made vulnerable. God's covenant with us through Jesus Christ opens us up and exposes us; we are made vulnerable and sensitive to our own actions and the actions of those around us. We become like chicks, like a baby farm animal. This is why Jesus speaks to the Pharisees in the way of a mother today:

*How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings (Lk 13).*

This is faith: becoming vulnerable enough to be mothered by God and Jesus, becoming humble enough to accept that we need a mother who loves us like God and Jesus love us, becoming sensitive enough to know that we do not know enough and must welcome the protection and care of one greater than us.

Right after Jesus says this about mothering the people of Jerusalem, he says *and you were not willing* to accept the offer, the covenant, the promise of God's love. Are you willing to accept God's loving promise in Jesus Christ today? Are we willing to become vulnerable, sensitive and humble enough to accept Jesus?

This is what Paul means when he tells the Philippians to *stand firm in the faith*. Stand firm, strong, confident in your humility, vulnerability and sensitivity brought about by God's loving covenant. Paul says,

*But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation so 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. 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. (Phil 3:20-4:1)*

“Who am I if I am not my state or my religion; who am I if I do not know I am good and others don't see me that way; who am I if I am not always right? Who are we if we know our ability to know all those things has been compromised by the darkness within and the evil without?”

Well, God does not answer the question by separating us from those decisions. Jesus divides us from what we think things to be and joins us to what is actually true. God separates us from our worries about the future by calling us back to God's loving promise. Jesus divides us from those human and earthly concerns and joins us to God's embracing and motherly covenant. The separations and divisions are merely two sides of the same animal, the things through which God walks to bring us his eternal covenant and promise. We are stuck in the middle with God and Christ.

The answer to “*Who am I?*” is not, “*I am the person who is always right, who always does good, who is strong and powerful because I know the truth*”.

No, the answer to “*Who am I?*” this week is, “*We are the humble, sensitive, vulnerable children of the loving God who fulfills God's promises for us in Jesus Christ.*”

Amen.