

“The Brood of Christ”
The Rev. Lauren McDonald
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, VA
2nd Lent – February 28, 2010
Genesis 15:1-12, 7-18, Luke 13:31-35

On Ash Wednesday we were invited to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word. Two weeks ago Michael talked to us about prayer, giving us concrete suggestions for how we can keep prayer alive in our daily routines. Last week, when we heard about Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, Michael explored how we, too, can use scripture to resist temptation. Prayer and devotion to scripture are two of the most important ways we can keep a holy Lent.

I have been meditating on today’s passages of holy scripture all week, and let me tell you, it’s been a challenge. In the lesson from Genesis we have to contend with a bunch of animal carcasses split in two as well as the mysterious smoking fire pot and flaming torch that pass between the dead animal halves while Abram sleeps in a deep and terrifying darkness. If that’s not edifying to study, then I don’t know what is. In our gospel passage we hear Jesus refer to Herod as a fox and then compare himself to a hen while lamenting that Jerusalem kills all the prophets. Certainly feels like a Lenten discipline to be studying that.

All the while that I've spent reflecting on odd scripture lessons, out in the world another earthquake has devastated another country, tsunamis have threatened, our national government seems so gridlocked that it feels like no productive work can be done, our public schools are looking at extreme budget cuts, homelessness is on the rise, the weather is getting weirder and weirder, and bad news seems to be coming at us right and left. How do we stand firm in the Lord when it seems like everything is falling apart?

Seeing as how it's Lent, we return to the Ash Wednesday invitation to keep a holy Lent. Prayer. Right. Ground ourselves in prayer. Abram did. He told God his worries that he would never have a child and that a servant in his house would be his heir. He was up front with God, expressing his frustration and disappointment that although God had promised him descendents, he didn't even have a single child. God makes a covenant with Abram. Note that it's a one-sided covenant. Abram isn't even awake when the smoking fire pot and flaming torch pass between the animal carcasses. There are some verses missing from the lectionary version of this story in which God talks about some of the bad things that will happen to Abram's descendents. God doesn't promise that they will live happily ever after, just that Abram's descendents will be as numerous as the stars. When Abram is in doubt he talks to God. Prayer. Right.

Scripture. Ah yes. Soaking ourselves in scripture. Although our lessons from Genesis and Luke are challenging, our Psalm for this morning provides strength and courage. "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom then shall I be afraid?"

As disturbing as the events are in our world today, we should not be afraid. The Lord is our light and our salvation, the strength of our lives. In the day of trouble the Lord shall keep us safe in his shelter and set us high upon a rock. I couldn't help thinking about my good friend who lives in Hawaii when I read that verse. As her friends kept writing to her on FaceBook to ask if she was okay yesterday, she kept insisting that she would be fine. "I'm at 1200 feet," she continued to say. High upon a rock.

If you haven't spent time with the Psalms lately, I encourage you to do so this Lent. Not only do they provide us with strength and comfort, reminding us that we don't need to fear because the Lord will sustain us, but they also express a wide range of human emotions, reminding us that we can be honest in our prayer. Just as Abram was. We can tell God what's going on in our hearts. We can tell God our fears. We can tell God when we're sad and when we're angry. We can even tell God when we're disappointed because our lives didn't turn out as we had planned. Those who wrote the Psalms share their deepest, innermost thoughts with God. So can we.

Prayer, right. Scripture, yes. It's good for us to pray and meditate on scripture at all times, but especially in Lent as we prepare for Holy Week and Easter. That brings us to our gospel lesson where Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and his passion. In this story, Jesus laments that Jerusalem kills the prophets. He also expresses his desire to gather Israel's children as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and yet they were unwilling. Jesus knows that he will be rejected in Jerusalem. Jesus knows that he will die there. Yet he doesn't turn back. And his desire is to gather the very people who will reject him as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.

Why weren't they willing then to be gathered under the wings of Jesus?
Why aren't we willing now? As we pray and study the scripture, I think that we have to ask that question. If Jesus desires us to dwell with the safety of his shelter, why do we resist? I wonder if it's because Jesus' idea of safety and our idea of safety are frequently two different things. Jesus' idea is to abide in God, to trust in God, even if that means walking to Jerusalem, facing a people who will reject him, and being crucified so that the baby chicks who rejected him might have eternal life. Our idea, well, my idea anyway, of abiding with God, of dwelling in the shelter of the Lord, means that my life will be happy and I will not have to struggle with disease or earthquake or recessions because God will save me from all those things. Being safe in the shelter of the Lord, hiding like a baby chick under her mother's wings, means, for me, that God will save me from suffering.

God doesn't promise that to Abram or Abram's descendents. God doesn't promise that to Jesus. God doesn't promise that to us. God became human and dwelled with us here on earth, as a mother hen dwells with her chicks, and God knew our suffering. God promises to be with us and to protect us from ultimate harm, that of dying with no hope of eternal life. But there is no promise that life will be easy. When we face all the suffering that this world can throw at us, we face it with the knowledge that God is with us, strengthening us, giving us what we need to endure.

The way we know that is through our prayer, our conversations with God.
The way we know that is through our meditating on the Word of God.
Prayer, right. Scripture, oh yes. That's how we keep a holy Lent.