

Genesis 15, Luke 13 Lament and Hen

I can't imagine why it is, but I'm sure you've noticed recently, as I have, how many people go away from here around this time of year. I mean, who would want to be anywhere else when they could be here, enjoying an outside world which is a delight in every way? Oddly, though, some do head out on trips, often to warmer places, and we are about to do the same. This afternoon we'll start driving to Florida, which we've never done before, having only flown there previously. Not quite sure what to expect, as we'll be attending our nephew's wedding on a beach on Anna Marie Island. Phil will actually be performing the wedding, and he's never performed a wedding on a warm sandy beach bordering an ocean; nor have I. The dress code was designated as "beach chic", which also took a little imagination for those of us living in northern Minnesota in March. We hope for some experiences of a warm paradise, but we've heard any number of minor horror stories from others who have recently traveled to Arizona or Florida. Some involve snow storms in these supposedly warm places, or terrible flights due to bad weather along the way, or the loss of luggage, or getting sick while traveling. Our son and his girlfriend are flying down to the wedding, but their travel plans changed because they were originally set to fly on a Boeing 737. The fact is, you never really know what will happen when you set out on a journey. Carefully though you may plan and prepare, the journey frequently takes some surprise turns.

Our lesson from Genesis presents us with a case in point. In Genesis 15, we meet up with Sarah and Abraham, who have taken a journey at God's urging back in Genesis 12, 3 chapters earlier. They were an elderly couple, childless, but living a stable life in a

secure and familiar setting. God called them to journey to this new place, this Canaan, where they would prosper and parent an entire new nation. With faith and courage, they set out, encountering any number of strange obstacles along the way, including one side trip where Sarah catches the eye of a local ruler and Abraham passes her off as his sister in order to avoid trouble and she ends up part of the leader's harem. Just the kind of stuff that happens when you and I travel! But they eventually achieve their goal and they prosper in this new land, except for one thing: they remain childless. However will they parent a new nation without a single offspring?

This is the background to the very interesting interaction we are about to explore between Abraham and the Lord. This story is set around 1700 BCE, although not written down until probably around 1000 BCE, 700 years later, because the Hebrew people didn't develop a written language until then. Nevertheless, it is around 3500 years old, and we can feel how very ancient and foreign it is as it continues.

Our text begins with the recording of a vision that Abram receives from God, one in which God reassures him, "Do not be afraid, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." All well and good, but it seems Abram is having some second thoughts about this whole journey he's undertaken. As so many of us discover when we travel, the destination isn't always quite what you expected. Yes, he's in this new land, but how will God keep God's promise of heirs and descendants to occupy the land? Abram is childless, and at that time, it looked as though his only "heirs" would be the progeny of a slave in his household. Abram proceeds to do something that Jesus will also do in our Gospel lesson: he laments. Jesus will lament over his inability to gather the people of

Jerusalem as a hen gathers her chicks. Abram laments over his inability to produce a son and heir. We might want to recognize that both of these heroes of faith are giving us an example of the honest expression of grief and frustration before God. Neither of them practices keeping a stiff upper lip. Here, Abram clearly lays out to God the nature of his unhappiness: he remains without a single biological son, and so God cannot possibly honor the promise God had made of Abram fathering a new people. And note that God does not chastise Abram for his honesty or lament; quite the opposite, in fact. God actually reassures him and expands upon the original promise. He does so using an object lesson for him, a kind of children's sermon of 3500 years ago. He asks Abram to step outside and count the stars in the night sky. I think that's amazing advice that we would all do well to follow as often as possible. On clear nights, step out on your deck or porch or front step and look up at the night sky and soak in, for a moment, the immensity of the universe, and the majesty of our Creator and Lord. Few things can reset our sense of perspective as well as counting the stars and considering the heavens which God's hands have made, as the Psalms say. A thoughtful look at the stars produces in us a sense of reverence and awe, and I see no reason Abram wouldn't have felt the same. Having done this, God informs Abram that his very descendants from his own offspring will be equally numerous, a nation beyond Abram's wildest imaginings. And Abram, once again, believes, and takes God at God's word.

The really strange part of the lesson follows, as Abram and God seal this deal with an ancient ritual of sacrifice, and here is where we can feel how very *old* this story is.

Abram prepares an animal sacrifice, as was done in that day in a common cultural

practice; this was the “cutting of a covenant”, involving the literal cutting of animals.

The one making the covenant passed between the animal halves as a way of sealing the deal. It is the Lord who passes through the sacrifice in the symbols of smoke and fire, the Lord who cuts the covenant. And, as we know, Abram will actually father two biological sons and spawn two faiths: with Sarah, he fathers Isaac, through whom the Jewish people trace their history, and with Sarah’s maidservant, Hagar, he fathers Ishmael, through whom the Moslem people trace their history. Abram’s journey most certainly takes strange and surprising turns, but he is strong enough to stay the course, to lament honestly, and to keep the faith.

Jesus is also on a journey in our Gospel lesson from Luke, a shorter journey than Abram’s, but a more dangerous one. He and his disciples are traveling from the relative safety of Galilee in the north to the danger zone of Jerusalem in the south. Jerusalem is the capital, the center of both Jewish power and Roman power. And neither of those centers of power viewed Jesus positively; Jesus threatened the status quo of both the Jewish rulers and the Roman occupation forces; they both wanted him to just go away. In fact, that’s what the pharisees urge Jesus to do as he approaches Jerusalem. They warn him that Herod, the Jewish ruler who is a front for Roman power, is gunning for him. They urgently tell him to turn back. We can’t know if they were genuinely concerned for his safety, or if they just didn’t want any trouble with their Roman occupiers. Regardless, Jesus refuses to follow their advice. Herod sees himself as big man, but Jesus sees him as a petty tyrant and bully and is not the least intimidated. He intends to complete his mission and God given destiny; he will enter Jerusalem. He will exorcise evil, he will

heal, and he will be crucified and raised. That is God's will as Jesus discerns it, and He will not put his safety or comfort above the completion of this divine mission. He will go to Jerusalem, even though it is traditionally the city where many a prophet has met with a bad end. And upon his arrival, he will, like Abram, lament. He will express honest grief and frustration before God.

In the poignant passage that follows, we hear Jesus grieving over the state of Jerusalem, and here is what he says: "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" What image does Christ use to describe his anguish and longing, to describe God's anguish and longing, in these words? That of a mother hen.

Scripture contains many references to birds, gladdening the hearts of all bird lovers. Jesus speaks about how God provides for the birds of the air. He also teaches that not even a sparrow falls to the ground without their Creator's knowledge. The Holy Spirit is embodied as a dove at the time of Jesus' baptism. In Psalm 91, God is described as lifting up the faithful as on the wings of an eagle. Noah sent both ravens and doves out from the ark to discover if the floods had subsided. So, birds are no stranger within Scripture, and I think we can see where the majestic eagle or the peaceful dove are worthy symbols of God. But chickens? This is the only Scriptural reference to chickens, and yet it comes from Christ Himself, as a description of Himself and of God.

In these words, Jesus paints for us a picture of God as a mother hen gathering chicks beneath her wings. And I am told by those who know chickens far better than I do, that hens are fiercely protective of their chicks. They may not be the brightest, fastest

birds around, but they are passionately devoted to their chicks' welfare. They gather them, protect them, and nurture them. Evidently this is the quality of God to which Jesus refers here. God wants to gather people together, to protect and nurture them. But people are not willing, they resist being gathered and nurtured. God wants to help us grow up a bit more before our next flight outside the nest. God is fierce in devotion to us, passionately committed to keep gathering us together no matter how many times we wander astray or scatter. We are here this morning as part of this community of faith because God gathers us. We forget that—we think we're here because it's a habit or we like the music or our friends are here or whatever. But all that's just the surface level. On a deeper level, we are here gathered because God, like a hen, is determined to bring us together. A turn of phrase we might keep in mind for this text is this: *God* gathers, *evil* scatters. You know how easily we scatter, whether from church, family, friends, marriage—we easily become scattered, which does not glorify God, but likely pleases Satan. *Evil* may want to scatter us, but *God*, like a mother hen, wants to gather us. That's the image of the Mother Hen which Christ uses for God this morning. And he mourns over the reality that Jerusalem, and all of us, are so reluctant to be gathered and so quick to become scattered. He laments. He honestly expresses his grief and frustration before God. And if Abram does so, and if Christ does so, probably we may do so also. God doesn't turn away from us when we lament. Or when the strange turns our journeys are taking cause us to grow doubtful or discouraged. Or when we lack the faith or courage to even start a journey. Because sometimes that's where we are, and God always meets us

where we are. Not to condemn or judge us. But to gather us, as a Mother Hen gathers her chicks.

The truth is, that sometimes that is exactly what we most need; to be gathered, comforted, strengthened, shielded. Because life is hard and sometimes it wears us out. Several of us are dealing with cancer diagnosis and treatment; others have close family members with serious health concerns. Or a terrible atrocity occurs, like the shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand, of Muslim worshippers. It's breaks our hearts. As I've talked with people this past week, I've had a sense that many are worn out; fatigued; wearied; feeling overwhelmed. The idea of being gathered beneath the wings of Christ as Mother Hen sounds awfully nurturing and strengthening, and sometimes that's we need before we can face whatever's next.

The hymn we're about to sing captures this need of ours perfectly: "Thy holy wings, O Savior, spread gently over me. And let me rest securely through good and ill in thee. O be my strength and portion, my rock and hiding place, and let my every moment be lived within thy grace." It describes that longing of ours so well. But remember, it's not just a one-sided longing; the whole point of this Scripture lesson is that *God* longs to gather *us*! Much as we may long for safe haven, or much as we may resist it; either way, God longs to gather us as a mother hen gathers her chicks, and God grieves when we refuse to be gathered and are scattered instead. We are gathered in God's name and beneath God's wings right now. So, be gathered! Be gathered in hearing the Word this morning. Be gathered at the table of the Lord in Holy Communion. Be gathered during fellowship time. And be gathered throughout the week, taking some time to reflect, look

up at the night sky, pray, sing---be gathered beneath the wings of God, and in the love of
God. Amen.