

OPENER:

News over the last seven days was dominated by twin tragedies that occurred in our world. A week ago today, Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 crashed shortly after takeoff, killing all 157 passengers and crew on board. Next, as we were all processing that tragedy, hearing the stories of the amazing people who were on board that flight who died, and then learning about the controversies surrounding the type of Boeing plane that crashed, news came on Friday of the horrific shooting in New Zealand. A man entered a mosque during Friday Prayers and killed 42 worshippers, left and drove a few miles and killed 7 more at another mosque. This took place in a city called “Christ Church.”

Our hearts break for the victims and their families. God’s heart breaks as well.

Jesus speaks of a city called:

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem.... How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”¹

FEAR:

FEAR, fear of Death, fear of dying, fear also of living, runs through our Lectionary readings today.

Abraham is fearful that he will die childless.

The Psalmist is fearful that God will not be there in times of trouble.

Paul, amid tears, fears that the Philippians have lost their way amidst persecution.

Today, we bring our fears with us— fear for ourselves, fear for our children, fear of the world.

It’s Lent, so maybe it all somehow fits. We now need no reminder of our mortality, or of the fragility of life.

¹ Luke 13.34

STORY:

There is a funny but true story that I heard recently about a young boy whose church asked him to be one of the people who imposed ashes on the congregation for Ash Wednesday. (This doesn't seem like a good idea but apparently it happened.) The church leaders rehearsed his part and how to do it and what to say: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

The boy repeated the line and he had it down pat. But when it came time to impose the ashes, the boy paused, got that deer in headlights look, and, instead of saying the rehearsed line, instead said to the congregant kneeling before him "You are going to die."

A liturgical mistake to be sure, in his youth and inexperience, he let the moment overwhelm him. Or, maybe he was a "prophet of God" telling it like it is.²

This week, maybe we don't need that stark truth to be told, or maybe we do.

IMPATIENCE:

Along with FEAR, a theme of IMPATIENCE also runs through our readings today: the persistent question: "Are we there yet?" seems to be floating around.

Abraham is getting old, impatient for a child to further his line. He wants God to fix it, and now.

God instead takes him outside, and... rather than provide all the answers all at once,... God takes Abraham outside for an astronomy lesson, and he shows him the stars. What a beautiful scene, of God providing this image that encapsulates the hope and promise that God has for Abraham. What an image for us, demonstrating our connection to all of humanity. We are all star-dust, we are all connected to the victims in Ethiopia and New Zealand and beyond.

But the astronomy lesson is not good enough for Abraham. He's scared of dying, he's impatient in his old age. So, God says: "let me communicate in terms that you might understand" this time in this strange ritual involving the sacrifice of animals. It's strange and foreign to us but it would not have been foreign to Abraham and his culture.

In those times, when a lesser king came to a greater king, a sacrifice of animals would be made and the lesser king was supposed to walk through it and then some

² <https://www.stephencrippen.com/homilies/2019/3/6/im-to-blame-i-was-wrong>

sort of divination or sign would occur. Something like that ritual covenant is happening here where it would have been Abraham's responsibility to walk through the sacrifice.

But what does Abraham do? He falls asleep. Abraham fails Lent, miserably. On week two, he has already eaten the chocolate, he has binge watched on TV, he has said the 4 letter words.

What does God do? God walks through the sacrifice for Abraham. We read that: "A flaming torch passed between the two pieces."³

In doing so, God makes the covenant with the impatient, fearful, undeserving Abraham.

This is where you say, wait a minute, I have heard this story before. This is how God relates to humanity—by walking with us, by suffering with us, by joining us—not always in ways that we expect or understand, and oftentimes in ways that test our patience and our understanding. But still, that is the narrative thread throughout Scripture, and through history. As individuals and as a group we are impatient and fearful, then sleepy and unfaithful, but God persists, God is, God abides.

ARCHITECTURE:

Just one other word about this strange, weird sacrifice. Here is maybe another way of understanding it, a way of thinking about it in our own context.

It has to do with Architecture. I was reading that one of the reasons that most churches are constructed with a center aisle is to reenact that sense of God walking through the midst of us, of making that sacrifice, of joining in a covenant with us. A too fine a point should not be necessarily made here because some churches do not have center aisles, and God is certainly there, and center aisles are important because then the brides' dress can flow freely, and other practical considerations.

But think about the symbolism: how at a wedding a couple walks through that center aisle with God, joining in this covenant, where great sacrifices have been made, and where so much is at stake. Or how every week the cross is carried through, we as a people part ways and bow our heads in fear and devotion and love.

³ Genesis 15.17

GOSPEL:

That brings us to our Gospel reading: the Pharisees are impatient, they try to instill fear into Jesus about when he is going to die:

Jesus is not impressed. He is not operating on their timeline. He is not scared. They say “Herod is going to kill you” and Jesus..... makes a joke. Jesus says I am not fearful of the political giants of that time. He calls Herod, a fox, another animal reference that might be lost on us but it’s not a compliment. Jesus replies with the equivalent of “What does the fox say?”

We get humor from Jesus, but it’s Lent so it’s dark humor: “You say I am going to die here, I am not going to die here but in Jerusalem because that’s where all prophets die.” Because Jesus is going to walk through that city, Jerusalem, where there too the crowd will part and make a center aisle for the true King.

CONCLUSION:

Someone once said that if during Lent, if you realize you are weak, you are doing the right thing. After the events of this week, I feel weak.

We have been invited into this season of Lent, into a time of self-examination not so that in 40 days, we will fix all of our problems. We are invited so that we can acknowledge them, we can recognize our limitations, we can know better what scares us. That process might help us to find and know God who is already there.

Lent is the time for that tension.

Tension because the laments and deficiencies of our selves and the larger world become more apparent, more obvious.

But it’s also a time of great hope, a time where that self-examination allows us to prune away the excesses of ourselves.

We then wait trusting not in our own ability, but in the great promise, written in the sky.

We then abide in God’s grace and love, trusting in a God that will walk down the center aisle with us.

AMEN