

If I were to try to identify a single theme running all through our scripture readings this morning, it might be something like this: “Trust in God, and do not be afraid—and because you are not afraid, go ahead and do the work God gives you to do.”

That is certainly the note struck in our first reading today, in this story of Abraham's lament to God, and the covenant God makes with Abraham. Abraham—or Abram, as he was called before God gave him a new name to signal his new life as the father of a multitude of faithful people—Abraham was called by God to leave behind everything he knew, to leave behind Ur of the Chaldeans, and to follow God wherever God would lead. And God promised to give Abraham a land to dwell in, and blessing to prosper him, and descendants more numerous than the sand of the seashore. So Abraham and Sarah left their home, they followed where God led, and for years, decades at this point in the story, they have been traveling the length and breadth of the land of promise, stopping and sojourning in various regions, building altars in all the places where God has appeared to them. Along the way, they've gathered flocks and herds and camels and servants and slaves—actually, they've become quite wealthy. But still Abraham and Sarah have no children. The whole promise hinges on having children—and having children is the one part of the promise that isn't coming true. And that is when God appears to Abraham and says, “Do not be afraid, your reward will be very great.” And Abraham says, “What reward?! You promised us children! We have no children! What good are land and flocks and herds and blessing if I have no descendants to pass them on to? What good is the promise if it all goes to a slave, a foreigner, born in my household? How can I *know* your promise will really come true?” Abraham asks God.

And it is in response to that challenge from Abraham that God takes him outside, and shows him the night sky, and says, “Count all the stars: that's how many descendants you will have.” It is in response to that challenge that God makes a covenant with Abraham—not just a *promise*, but a *covenant*, a sealed agreement. That whole ceremony with the sacrificial animals cut in two, and the two pieces laid over against each other—that's how covenants, political and military treaties, were made in Abraham's time. The two parties to a covenant would sacrifice an animal, cut it in two, walk between the pieces, then each take a piece, as a sign that they were equal partners equally bound to each other to keep the covenant true. God, the Creator of the Universe, *binds himself* in covenant to Abraham, a mortal man—and Abraham is so strengthened by that covenant, so empowered by that connection, that he is able to go on following on where God leads the way, he is able to go on living in faith, he is able to go on projecting his energy and his being and his life toward that moment when Isaac will be born and the promise will be complete and God's blessing will be set free to flow into the entire world through Abraham and Sarah and their descendants for ever.

Abraham was afraid that the promise would not come true. He was afraid that the God who had turned his life around would not then make his life whole. He was afraid that his work and his faith and his very being would turn out to be meaningless. But God reached out to Abraham, God covenanted with Abraham—and because of that connection, Abraham put his trust in God, and he was not afraid—and because he was not afraid, he could go ahead and do the work God gave him to do.

That same theme is present in our Gospel reading today. In this story Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem: he has already set his face toward his departure which he is to accomplish in the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it. Jesus knows that rejection and passion and death lie ahead of him. But at the moment, Jesus is still in Galilee, he hasn't crossed over into Judean territory yet—but even here, Jesus is in danger. Some Pharisees come and tell Jesus that Herod, the ruler of Galilee, is trying to kill him. Herod had already killed John the Baptist, because John condemned Herod's marriage

to his brother's widow; some people were saying that Jesus was John the Baptist come back to life; so it is altogether plausible that Herod wanted to kill Jesus to complete the job he'd begun with John. So Jesus has danger behind him and danger before him; he is threatened in Galilee and he is threatened in Jerusalem. But Jesus says, "I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way." Jesus is not afraid of Herod's threat. Jesus is not afraid of Jerusalem's threat. Jesus is not afraid, because he trusts in the mission God has given him, he trusts God's call to be a prophet, to be the Messiah, to be God's Beloved Son who will die and through death will open up the way of everlasting life. So Jesus goes on his way, casting out demons and performing cures, gathering the people and proclaiming God's blessing, today and tomorrow and the next day after that. For Jesus, too, the call is to trust in God, and not be afraid—and because he is not afraid, to go ahead and do the work God gives him to do.

And finally, that theme is in our Epistle reading today, in Paul's words of encouragement and exhortation to the Christians at Philippi. Paul warns the Philippians that there are those who live as enemies of the cross of Christ: they worship their own appetites, nothing is more important to them than gratifying their immediate desires, and they live in fear of what would happen to them if their desires aren't met. And in a way, that's very natural: appetites are powerful motivators: hunger, thirst, ambition, anxiety, sadness, loneliness—they make us uncomfortable, they make us want *something more* than the way things are, they make us afraid that maybe we'll always feel this empty and we'll never be able to feel better. Fear of not being able to fulfill desire can be a crippling thing. But Paul says, "Do not be afraid of that." Paul says we do not need to be afraid of unfulfilled desire, we do not need to worship our appetites, because we are expecting Jesus, Jesus who will transform us, Jesus who will raise up our humiliation and emptiness into glory, Jesus who will bring to us a life far more abundant than anything our transitory appetites can imagine. We expect transformation in Jesus, Paul says, and because of that expectation, we can live here and now, standing firm in the Lord, beloved and loving, shaping our lives toward the example of Christ. In the Epistle, too, the message to us is clear: "Trust in God, and do not be afraid—and because you are not afraid, go ahead and do the work God gives you to do."

And that message of trust and courage and work in the Spirit is Good News. It's Good News for each and every one of us, each in our own way—because each and every one of us is assaulted by those same fears, each in our way. The fear that the promise of our life isn't working out the way we'd expected. The fear that our hopes and aspirations for life will be met with opposition and resistance and rejection. The fear that if we don't act *now* to gratify our immediate desires, then we'll never be able to be *really* happy. We're all assaulted by those fears—and those fears can sometimes do quite crippling things to us. But Lent is a time for us to confront those fears—Lent is a time to come right up to them face-to-face and to discover that, with God's grace, we do not have to let those fears control us. Our fasting and abstinence and giving-things-up teaches us that we don't have to gratify every desire right away—and that not gratifying some desires can actually make us happier. Our self-examination and repentance brings us face-to-face with the opposition and resistance and rejection we often place in Jesus' way—and words of absolution and forgiveness teach us that we can set that resistance aside and walk with Jesus on his Way. Our prayer and meditation and studying scripture reminds us of the power of God's promise—even if that promise doesn't always work out the way we expect—and it teaches us to find our lives' meanings in our covenant with God. All through our Lenten disciplines, the Good News of our scriptures today reaches out to us and proclaims, "Trust in God, and do not be afraid—and because you are not afraid, go ahead and do the work God gives you to do."

Let that be our calling in this time of Lent. And let that be our promise for a life of Easter joy. Amen.