

“Love, Inevitably”

**Mr. Eric Post, Seminary Intern
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**

**Sunday, February 21, 2016
Second Sunday in Lent**

Readings from Scripture: Genesis 15:1-18 and Luke 13:31-35

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision. “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” But Abram said, “O Lord Go, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” And Abram said, “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” But the word of the Lord came to him, “This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.” He brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Then he said to him, “I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.” But he said, “O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?” He said to him, “Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when the birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. Then the Lord said to Abram, “Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years; but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”

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, saying, “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” He said to them, “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, 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, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’ Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather you children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

Luke 13:31-35

Would you please pray with me? Loving and gracious God, we give thanks for the gift of your holy word, whether we experience it in scripture or whether we see your word manifest before us in the world, we are ever grateful. I ask, Lord, that you bless the words that you have placed on my heart this morning that they may be transformed into the holy word of God to help do your work in the world. Amen.

I have a confession to make before all of you this morning. May I do so in confidence? I sometimes play the lottery. As a matter of principle faith we Presbyterians are really not supposed to engage in any form of gambling. Gambling according to our General Assembly of 1950 is “an unchristian attempt to get something for nothing at the expense of others.” Subsequent General Assemblies have affirmed this position and I get it. On many levels gambling goes against the principles of our Christian faith. Placing money on such a high pedestal is idolatry, worshiping something other than God. I admit it. I’m hard-pressed to explain how I reconcile my own faith in God’s will and purposes for this world and still occasionally play a game of chance. And besides the theological complications of gambling, I’ll be the first to admit that the lottery is a fool’s game. My odds of winning millions of dollars are far worse than those I face of being struck by lightning. Not only are the odds of winning the lottery horrible, research shows--and yes, there is research into such things--that those who have won the lottery generally find their lives suddenly filled with unimagined misery. You might recall Rev. Holyan preaching a few months back how lottery winners usually end up feeling utterly isolated. That makes sense to me and maybe to you.

Have you ever tried hanging out with someone who is a lot wealthier than you? You go to restaurants and its “I’ll get the check.” “No, I’ll get the check.” It seems that sooner or later somebody ends up feeling really uneasy. So it’s kind of the same way with the lottery. Suddenly you’re rich but your old friends and family don’t want to be with you. Those who have earned their money or inherited it don’t really want to hang out with you either. So I realize that spiritually and rationally it makes no sense to play the lottery. I don’t know about you, though, but when I’m driving down the highway and I see big numbers on that lottery billboard climbing higher and higher every day, I sometimes get sucked in.

After the crazy rains that hit our area just after Christmas last year, I was especially fixated. We had just moved into a new house, optimistically overextending our finances a bit. While we were fortunate we didn’t see the kind of flooding that many experienced who live right by the Meramec, we did find ourselves dealing with tons of rain water that was flash flooding around and into our crawl space. So while I spent the next several days cleaning up the muddy mess and wondering how we were going to afford to grade our yard and waterproof our crawl space, the power ball jackpot sign started to have a new word on it: billion. I know I wasn’t the only one who noticed that because it seemed that everywhere I turned, people were talking about it. There was a kind of mass hysteria about the power ball. So many people were daydreaming about wealth that it almost seemed that nothing else mattered. Even serious news outlets were making a big deal about this. NPR had a reporter ask people waiting in line for lottery tickets what they would do if they won. The New York Times had an economist offer investment advice to any potential winner. So it couldn’t have been so bad that while I mopped up all this muddy water from my crawl space, I was secretly dreaming about my Mediterranean villa.

In my escapist fantasizing, after all, I was absolutely in some pretty good company. I’ve wondered since, though, about what that fantasy of winning a huge amount of money signifies for me and for others. I think for me it allows me a chance to imagine what it would feel like to financially invincible. I would never again wonder if I would be able to pay a bill. I would not have to worry about education or health care for my family. Perhaps what I’m really confessing this morning is not really about the lottery. What is more difficult to tell you and myself is why I play. In my heart I feel incredibly vulnerable. I certainly wish I didn’t and I wish I felt more certain about the future, my life, less afraid of what might come. Whether I want to admit it or not, I think what I really want is more control.

The two scripture passages that we read this morning share themes of human fear and divine reassurance. In the text from Genesis Abram expresses fear of having no descendants. And in Luke 13 some Pharisees try to incite fear in Jesus by telling him of threats against his life. In both instances God's will and purposes are unshakable. The answers to our own fears, it would seem, are simply to have confidence in the Lord, to have faith, to allow God to gather us up as a hen gathers her brood under her wings. To look up into the stars and see in them the infinite scope of God's promises for us. The problem for me is that while I feel that most of the time, there are some days that I just don't. When our passage from the book of Genesis was recorded some two and a half to 3,000 years ago, the land that God promised to Abram and his descendants, everything between the Nile and Euphrates Rivers probably seemed almost endless. We now think of this strip within the fertile crescent of western Asia as a relatively small piece of the earth.

Fulfilling Hebrew prophesy, Jesus' life culminates in Jerusalem, the political and spiritual center of that land. When we hear Israel named in the gospels, it signifies a more expansive understanding of who God's people are. Almost as soon as Christ was crucified, his message was taken with great haste by his disciples to all who would hear, including those living well beyond Judea. The concept of salvation was no longer limited to one people or one geographic region. The Mediterranean world of the first and second centuries was changing, was becoming more dynamic and cosmopolitan and the mission of the early church embraced this understanding of the world. There is always a danger of being nostalgic about the early church, but it seems safe to say that those early disciples were fearless. Against the naysayers of their own Hebrew people and at risk of persecution from Rome, the early disciples went forth proclaiming the good news of Christ everywhere they could.

But though the early years of the church may have been characterized by courage, we know that the history of the Christian church includes instances of its leaders acting out of fear. The crusades, the inquisition, the pogroms, all examples of a good thing, a message of love and grace gone terribly, terribly wrong. Dark chapters of history when fear simply got the best of folks. John's epistle proclaims there is no fear in love. Love casts out fear. But we would be hard-pressed to proclaim that message to those of history who were persecuted in Christ's name. Fear can also be a destructive source of stagnation, entrenchment and rigidity, preventing us from moving towards God's purposes for shalom, peace, unity, wholeness. Fear can be a crutch, a defense mechanism, a holding onto what feels safe. While God's revelation in Jesus Christ should always be sufficient, how can we not be terrified by the mystery that remains? The problem is that often when we try to fill in those gaps ourselves, especially when we use religious rationale to do so, history also bears this out. Until modern times people afflicted with mental illness were often felt to be possessed by demons. Most of those accused of practicing witchcraft in Salem in 1692 were more likely guilty of nothing more than being both contentious and female. Even today debates rage on about the environment, evolution, gender, sexuality, with many of the arguments fueled by fear and framed in religious idolatry.

When Galileo proposed that the sun does not, in fact, rotate around the earth, his ideas were considered heresy. If humanity is created in the image of God, then the earth must be the center of the physical universe. Some climate change deniers use similar logic. We simply cannot destroy the earth because it was created by God. The Bible tells us that we are to have dominion over the earth and to be fruitful and multiply--and multiply, and so on. We so badly want to feel that we know all the answers that our future is absolutely certain, but the fragility and finite nature of our earthly existence challenges these notions.

Way back in the 1980s when I was in high school, my freshman science teacher confidently told us that there are nine planets in our solar system, with Pluto being the smallest and most distant of these. Other solar systems might exist but we'd probably never know since they are too far away to ever be seen by a telescope. Since then new methods have shown evidence of at least 500 additional solar systems in our galaxy alone.

Pluto has lost its planet status. And the existence of another, far larger and far more distant ninth planet in our solar system has recently been claimed. Evidence of gravitational waves was also discovered and recorded for all to hear. You can go online and Google it and you can hear this sound. It's the sound of two black holes colliding. This sound apparently confirmed Einstein's general theory of relativity which I had to look up. It describes our physical reality as a universe in which space and time are interwoven and dynamic, able to stretch, shrink, and jiggle. Mind boggling. Scary. What little we actually know about our physical reality. No matter how much we'd like to claim confidence in our understanding of existence, our universe and our place in it remains primarily a holy, humbling mystery.

Two summers back I worked as a chaplain intern at Barnes-Jewish Hospital. I was assigned to a general medical floor which meant that the patients there often had a number of ailments and were likely to be some of the sickest in the hospital. Hospitals have a kind of democratizing effect on their populations. Whatever a person's background or status, they tend to feel a loss of control, frustration and loneliness. Whether homeless or a VIP, patients are hooked up to the same machines, they generally receive the same care from the same staff. There is no better sign of this leveling than people's spiritual responses when they are faced with acute illness. There is no telling how individuals will feel about God and religion when faced with illness and death. As you might expect, some find religion while others lose it. Perhaps most common, though, are patients who were never religious in the first place or who lost their faith long ago. I'd usually know what to expect when I entered a patient's room who had listed their religious affiliation as "none" on their hospital intake form. As soon as I'd walk in and identify myself as a chaplain, I'd hear "No, thank you" or "I'm good on that" or "Why did they send you to me?" In response I'd usually say that sometimes it just helps to talk and that I was there to offer support, not necessarily just of the spiritual kind.

One of my most memorable visits was with a gentleman who had a hand-written sign on his door that said, "Please, no visitors". After a few days, though, I asked the charge nurse about him and she said, "Oh, he's a grumpy one. But he's probably not going to live much longer, so why don't you give him a try?" So I knocked on the door and I marched right in, almost bumping into a relative who tried to stop me. "Oh, you're a chaplain?" she asked. "He really doesn't want to talk." I just stopped in my tracks and smiled at the man in the bed who stared at me steadily. "It's all right" he said in a raspy whisper. As the relative left the room, I pulled up a chair to his bedside and over the next hour or so I talked with the man--I'll call him Jim--about everything and nothing. He told me right off the bat that he hadn't wanted to speak with a chaplain because his family were all so religious and that he wasn't welcome in their church. His family kept trying to pray over him, he said. When I asked why he decided to talk to me, he said that he liked how I barged right in. He had an old-school charm about him with a dry wit. He kind of reminded me of Johnny Carson or Frank Sinatra. He asked me if I like jazz, which I do. And he launched into a long discussion of rather obscure jazz artists from the '50s and '60s. He talked about music in such a passionate way, that I soon realized that he was actually telling me about his spiritual life. "Maybe I should be glad the church pushed me away," he said, "otherwise I might not have discovered so much about jazz." Jim told me that he was preparing to die and I asked him if I might walk with him part of way. He agreed and then even asked me to pray for him.

We were praying when his relative came back into the room. As I left, she followed me out and introduced herself as Jim's sister. She seemed dumbfounded, even shocked and asked me how I got her brother to pray. She and the rest of the family had been trying to pray with him since he got sick, she told me. She asked me my denomination and when I told her Presbyterian Church USA, she responded, "That's liberal, isn't it? Well, that's okay." she said. "I can hardly believe you had him praying." Within a day or so I received a message that Jim was rapidly declining. The sister requested that I meet her and other family in the ICU where Jim had been transferred. When I arrived I was introduced to the members of a rather large family. They each came up to me and expressed their effusive thanks for, as they put it, "helping Jim to open his heart again to

God.” Even though Jim was near death, his family members seemed more relieved than anything now that they believed that I had helped Jim get good with God. I wanted to tell them that I was no hero, that I believed that Jim had always been good with God. I wanted to encourage them to tell him, while they still could, how much they loved him no matter what, just as God had. But I also knew when to leave well enough alone and to celebrate the relief that I saw in their faces--to celebrate the gift that Jim and that God had given this family. They were now able to accept his dying without fear.

I recently said to my wife that most of our problem would go away if only we won the lottery. She just looked at me and then said, “Look around. We’ve already won the lottery.” She is right, of course. The ways that I’ve experienced the love and grace of our Lord through family, through nature and through church, etc. is really beyond measure. And as we all consider our lives within this holy mystery, may our hearts be open to whatever ways we might witness the promises and providence of God, whether in the stars, the laughter of children, in the melodies of music. May we remain open to the relentless inevitable love as offered to us in our living Lord. Amen.