

C Lent 2 3.13.22

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Luke 13:31-35

Focus Statement: God gathers us in and holds us close.

We're going to start right off today with some fun facts, because I know how much you all love it when I dive face first into translation issues. First, one basic statement, that we all know, but it's easy to forget. The Bible was not written in English. English as a language, at least in the form we speak it, did not even exist when the bible was written. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew, and the New Testament in Greek. At some point both were translated into Latin, but there they stopped until Martin Luther in the fifteenth-hundreds. But that's really more history than you need right now. The point is, the bible we read in worship is translated. And translation always involves interpretation. It is impossible to directly, word for word, translate anything, because that's not how language works.

I open with this because I want to start by talking about a translation question in our text this morning. In the first reading, you heard: "And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness." But that's not how the Hebrew reads. The Hebrew reads, "And he believed him; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness." What's the difference? The difference is, the Hebrew doesn't actually make clear that the him is the Lord. The him could be the Lord, but it could also be Abram. We don't know really know who is he and who is him. The author of the commentary I was reading called this verse her, "favorite ambiguous antecedent in all of Scripture."

The NRSV translation's decision to assign the one being believed and doing the reckoning as the Lord makes a certain amount of sense. But for the sake of argument, let's take a look at how it reads if we flip it and "Abram reckoned it to the Lord as righteousness." After all, look how the story unfolded. God appeared to Abram in a dream and promised him a great reward, echoing a promise God had already made to Abram back in chapter twelve, that Abram would be the father of a great nation. But nothing had happened since chapter twelve in the whole descendant direction, except Abram had gotten older and the likelihood of descendants decreased. So when God appeared with this promise again, Abram asked for proof. What will you give me, to assure me that this promise can be trusted?

Abram challenged God for proof of his accountability. It seems bold, maybe even scandalous, to challenge God. Didn't we just last week hear Jesus say to the devil, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test"? But putting God to the test is exactly what Abram did here. Prove it, you said you'd do this, you've said it twice now—and God will actually say it a third time before the promise comes true—show me some evidence of this promise. It's what Abram's doing, and it's also totally biblical. Read the psalms, they do this ALL THE TIME. The psalms challenge God, yell and god, rail on God, save me, help me, pay attention to me. Abram was in good company when he asked God for proof of the promise.

Abram was in good company, and God responded as such. The Bible tells us God took Abram outside and showed him the stars. The commentary writer I was reading remarked that she imagines God wrapping one arm around Abram's shoulder while gesturing to the

sky with the other as they walk outside together. Look, look at these, look at all these stars. “So shall your descendants be.” And Abram believed God, and as the Medieval Jewish scholar Rabbi Moses ben Nahman phrased it, “[Abram] considered it due to the righteousness of the Holy One, blessed be He, that He would give him a child under all circumstances, and not because of Abram’s state of righteousness and reward... Thus from now on he would no longer have to fear that sin might prevent the fulfillment of the promise.”

That’s not to say that Abram remembered God’s righteousness all the time, or acted in accordance with that righteousness all the time. There was a lot more screwing up in Abram’s future before, and after, the promised descendant arrived on the scene. But in that moment, for that moment, Abram knew that God was trustworthy, that God would keep God’s promise, no matter what Abram did, because God was, is, righteous.

I was thinking about Abram and the righteousness of God when I was reading our Gospel reading for this morning. It’s just a short, little passage, but there is so much longing in it, so much hope and comfort. In this passage we find Jesus well on his way to Jerusalem. Since the announcement of Jesus’ birth, when Mary sang of how he would cast the mighty down and lift up the lowly, a confrontation between the kingdom of God, represented by Jesus, and the powers of the world, represented by Herod, has been brewing. With each step Jesus took toward Jerusalem, the tension of that impending confrontation mounted. The disciples could feel it, the crowds could feel it, even the Pharisees could feel it, and they came to warn Jesus, get away from here, Herod wants to kill you.

To which, with single-minded focus, Jesus responded, “Go and tell that fox for me,” nothing will stop me from this goal. “I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.” I’m going to keep on healing, teaching, gathering, and saving, until the job is done. And nothing, not even death and especially not you, Herod, some trumped up excuse for a leader, is going to keep me from that work. “Yet, today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way,” because why? “Because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.” Now, obviously, it is totally possible for a prophet to be killed outside Jerusalem, lots of prophets were, are, killed all over the place. What Jesus is doing here with Jerusalem is he is using it as the location he is headed, yes, but also as a stand-in for the people whom he desires to gather. The Bible isn’t a story about how the awful people of Jerusalem killed Jesus, it is a story of human brokenness and a God so committed to relationship with God’s creation that nothing would keep God apart from God’s people. We hear that longing in the beautiful imagery of verse thirty-four. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem,” called twice because throughout scripture, the repeated name is how God calls people to Godself, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it. How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing.”

This hen image is powerful. Because we don’t think of hens as particularly fierce animals, and they’re not. One of the people in the sermon podcast I listen to remarked that a chicken is one of the few members of the animal kingdom he thinks he could take in a fight. Hens are not particularly fierce or menacing, but if you try to get between them and their

chicks, they will come at you with beak and claws and wings. Probably not succeed, but die trying. Dear people of God, that's Jesus. That's what Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem to do. To gather us, reluctant, unwilling, obstinate though we be, Jesus is on his way to save us. And nothing, nothing, not Herod, not Rome, not our own unwillingness, nothing will stop Jesus from what he has come to do.

So remember that, dear people of God. Hold that close when the world is hard and the way unclear. Reckon it to God as righteous, because Jesus had come to gather you, to love you, to save you. No matter what. Thank be to God. Amen.