

“God’s Permanent Promise”

The Gospel Lesson for today is read from Luke 13:31-35

**Hear the words from the disciple Luke:**

Read Luke 13:31-35

“The Word of God for the people of God.”

**“Thanks be to God”**

**Let us pray:**

Lord, we have heard you call each of our names. We have come forth to be your disciples. We are here because we are trying to be more faithful and loving.

Yet, we are periodically reminded by the example of Jesus and his suffering love that we are reluctant to the difficulties of faithful discipleship. It is not easy for us to endure.

Lord, give us the grace we need to be your disciples. Do not give up on us, loving Savior. Keep correcting us, rebuking us, teaching us, transforming us, until we come to resemble those followers whom you deserve. This is our earnest desire, to embody your will for the world in our lives today and for all eternity. Amen.

**Intro:**

If you remember last week we began the season of Lent. That means from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday, we are invited to do without some things we are perfectly capable of having. Last week we focused on the wilderness- the place where Satan tested Jesus. I said that sooner or later, every one of us would get to take our own wilderness test, our own trip to walk in the desert and discover who we really are and what our lives are really about. Today I want to focus on bringing a word of encouragement, more of a reminder, as you take the Lenten wilderness walk one day at a time. I want to remind you of God’s covenant, of God’s promise

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first spoken to Abram and then shown through Jesus and that still to this day his promise is being kept.

One septillion, (that’s 24 zero’s), in the American counting system, 1 quadrillion in the European is a rough estimate of just how many stars there might be. Just as far as the stars are from us, in our OT Genesis text this morning we see that God’s promise seems very far off from Abram. Abram yearns for something closer and more concrete – the solid weight of a newborn heir in his arms or the firm ground beneath his feet in a place he could call finally call home. Perhaps star-gazing wasn’t enough for this shining example of faith. Perhaps, with Abram, we know we are in good company when we question and impatiently demand that we see proof of God’s promises kept as we continue our walk in the wilderness and begin to star gaze too.

Humans are meant for stargazing. From the earliest civilizations, humanity tended to look to the sky for answers to all sorts of questions.

When we look up at the night sky, we see the same stars that Abram did that night that he asked tough questions of God, the same stars that the magi did as they read the sky in search of a new king who would free his people, the same stars that made the psalmist break out in song and claim that God had a name for each one of them (Psalm 147:4). What happens, though, when God and God’s promises seem as distant as the stars themselves? What happens when a family who has prayed for years for a child asks with Abram, “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless?” What happens when someone loses a house, a job, health care, and in the struggle to survive, asks: “O Lord, God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?” Certainty is elusive in the world in which we live. We all know of people that are waiting in the dark for urgent prayers to be answered and God’s promise to come into fruition. How do we keep our faith burning brightly in our hearts when the stars that are meant to guide us grow dim and cold?

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Until this moment in Genesis, Abram has unquestioningly done everything that God had asked of him. He left his homeland, built some altars, made some bad decisions, parted from some of his family, all the while following God’s promises of land and descendants like a trail of blessings. As chapter 15 opens, however, Abram has begun to question whether this promise of land and offspring will ever come to pass. It appears Abram is willing to have faith up to a point, then the fulfillment of the promises of God become doubtful. That is precisely when the questions, confusion, fear, and doubt set in.

Abram is walking the quintessential human wilderness journey of faithfulness in God. If we are grounded in our faith when we begin our journey, we too trust in the promises of God. If we keep walking on our journey and those promises don’t seem to be any nearer, then we start questioning – our own faith, God’s faithfulness, the possibility of our dreams, the hurt of human suffering, the fear that we were wrong to trust in the first place. It is a painful place to be, sitting on the ground and staring up at a sky that seems as far away as we can imagine. It is precisely this experience that is a catalyst for our growth in faithfulness, as it was Abram’s. It is in the questioning that Abram learns to trust again. Lent, as we know, is a transformation of the heart. Question by question, Abram’s heart is being shaped into a more trusting form. Perhaps for those in your congregations, dear preachers, they might need to learn the same lesson this Lent as they explore their own wildernesses and dreams, as they count the stars. Their hearts are just as pliable (and fragile) as Abram’s.

Abram sets a familiar pattern for Lent and our cycle of faith, doubt, and finally trust. What the lectionary reading leaves out is the part of Abram’s dream that says before God’s promises will be fulfilled (and they will be because God always keeps God’s promises), there will be a time of struggle and hardship. Just like the lectionary, we tend to want to skip over that

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piece. Four hundred years is a long time to keep trusting, keep moving, keep following God through a land that is not our own. But this is what this long season of Lent is about. We are given time in the wilderness to ask the tough questions and learn to trust our heart to God’s heart, our steps to God’s pathway. The way may be long and winding, but the God who set the stars in motion will guide us on our journey. And perhaps the next time that we look up at the septillion stars, we might trust that God has put just one there so that we might find our way home.<sup>1</sup>

Let us pray:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/lent-2019-worship-planning-series/march-17-second-sunday-in-lent-year-c/second-sunday-in-lent-2019-year-c-preaching-notes>

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**Prayers of the People**

In peace, let us pray.

Have mercy, O God. For the peace of the world, that a spirit of respect and compassion may grow among all peoples, in the world and in your church, we pray to you, most Gracious God. Have mercy, O God. For those in positions of public trust, that they may serve in ways that enhance the common good, promoting justice, dignity and freedom for all, we pray to you O God. Have mercy, O God. For a blessing upon the labors of all, and for wisdom in caring for your creation, we pray to you, most loving God. Have mercy, O God. For all who suffer and are in pain, for all who grieve, for those who are imprisoned, oppressed, or enslaved, that they may be released and freed from distress, we pray to you O Christ. Christ have mercy. For this community, that we may be awake to your word and responsive to your call, that in all we do your glory may shine, we pray to you O Christ. Christ have mercy. For those with whom we disagree, and those we do not understand. Give us the grace and humility to practice kindness and gentleness, we pray to you, O Christ. Christ have mercy. For ourselves, for the forgiveness of our sin and hardness of heart, for the strength and courage to follow Jesus more closely, we pray to you. Holy Spirit, come to us. Free us from anxiety; fill us anew with joy, peace and patience; give us health of mind, body and spirit; empower us to serve you and our neighbors in all we do, we pray to you. Holy Spirit, come to us. Holy One, come to us. Transform us into your image from one degree of glory to the next, and sustain us until that day we are united with you and all the saints, rejoicing with endless joy. May it be so, O Trinity of Love. Alleluia! Amen.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/liturgical-resources-for-2019-general-conference>