

Sermon for 13 March 2022@Bethesda UMC/Baltimore 21214

Second Sunday in Lent

Scriptures: Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Psalm 27 (UMH758); Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

*"Agenda"*

Have you been able to retreat?

By that I mean, has the example of the early Christians, and the hint of their traditions we have in Bible readings, hymns, prayers and customs helped you talk to yourself, as though God was in the room? I pray so.

Is it a lonesome road for you? That creepy first lesson from Genesis today reminds us how far back we go as a people: Abraham falls into a deep sleep; animals are killed and sacrificed, and a smoking torch symbolizing what? The Spirit of God? The trance associated with getting religion; in many people's minds spooky feelings, even visions, and certainly dreams. All these images are touched in our first lesson. God takes the initiative, as is almost always the case in the Old Testament making of a covenant. Abraham objects, has questions, but God promises and Abraham believes. The scene with the animals perhaps comes from ancient promises in general, where if the covenant is not kept, the maker suffers the fate promised.

The point for us this Sunday here is that we scarcely get going on any real exchange with God, any honest searching of ourselves, before we find ourselves facing consequences and admitting truths we like to glide by in daily living. Before we know it, we're embarked on a journey. If this, then that. Lent asks us to admit that, and to move into the wisdom that's available within and around us, now.

The psalm is a beautiful song of reassurance, that has strengthened believers in all sorts of circumstances as they followed through on decisions over the generations. "The Lord is my light and my salvation."

The brief selection from Philippians reminds us that example is fundamental to teaching. We may hold back in modesty and humility, but we teach, and we learn, through behavior, and observation. More than that, this journey we find ourselves on is so incredibly promising, so beyond imagining, that nothing in science or experience can project where we will land ... all our scriptural images are just that. Call our future starlike ... The shape of our present selves and surroundings is only, as Paul says, a transformation, not a diagram. To be honest, describing even our current worldly future has all the amazements we can handle, so expect miracles starting now.

Up close, at last, we have the Gospel lesson, with Jesus clearly predicting the early, earthly end of his existence. Mention is often made of the kind concern of Pharisees, who usually are against him... reminding us that Paul was a Pharisee, and as many believe, so was Jesus ... To be serious about one's faith often puts one in the role of critic, and runs the risk of pride as well. That point is not the main one for us today. What we see, day by day, not only during this retreat called Lent, but year round, is that ease and plenty, light and what passes for success and even happiness, are not the essence of this covenant.

What we see, when we start this retreat, is an agenda. God, reality, the Spirit of the universe, has an agenda.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.