

“The word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision.” Abram, then about 75 years old, has journeyed from Ur, in Mesopotamia, to the land of Canaan, where God speaks to him: “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.”

At the center of this saga lie the fact that Abram and his wife Sarai have been childless all these years—likely a source of great pain and dismay, in a culture that values producing heirs and multiplying one’s descendants—a culture that considers barrenness a judgement from God.

In response to God’s call, Abram has traveled more than 700 miles from Mesopotamia to the borders of present-day Iraq, another 700 miles into Syria, some 800 down to Egypt, and then finally into Canaan – what is now Israel. A trek of over 2,000 miles that likely took several months. Imagine, if you will, walking from Utah to Maryland.

Abram makes it to Canaan, and now God promises him: “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” “So shall your descendants be.”

I can imagine Abram, now three quarters of a century old, mulling this over. God’s covenant that Abram will be Father of Many Nations must seem, at this point in his life, most unlikely. How must Abram have felt about this vision?

Not surprisingly, Abram has some questions for God. He asks how he can know he will possess the land God has promised. He must wonder, will God really give him a child now, after all this time? Yet despite the unlikeliness of it all, even still, “he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.”

We also know that despite Abram's belief, it was far from a smooth journey from there. Abram goes childless for another two decades. Later in Genesis we learn that Abram impregnates their servant Hagar and laughs when God tells him Saraí too will become pregnant, saying, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?"

What seemed a most unlikely scenario decades ago in Canaan now seems preposterous. But indeed, Abraham does bear many descendants and live to realize God's promise, though his life pilgrimage is filled with many ups and downs.

What do we do when our reality doesn't seem in synch with God's promises? In the often-painful uncertainties of our everyday lives, how do we hold fast to the promise of the resurrection and the reign of God's eternal kingdom?

Each and every day we awaken to the dark realities of our world: the evil perpetuated by those who take innocent lives and persecute the vulnerable, the evil done by those whose "God is the belly, whose glory is in their shame, whose minds are set on earthly things."

Our hearts break over images of bombed maternity hospitals and churches and throngs of frightened people forced to flee their homes—and heartbreak turns to disgust and rage—and perhaps a feeling of helplessness.

From Syria to South Sudan to Afghanistan to Ukraine, to the streets of our own communities here in America, man's violence against one another rages on. In such a barren and broken world, how do we stand firm in the Lord?

One place we can start is by examining Scripture's stories of lives transformed. Abram and Saraí, once barren, become Abraham and Sarah, the Father and

Mother of Many Nations. They choose time and again, despite the odds, to obey God—and they see his promises are fulfilled. Saul, persecutor of Jews, becomes the apostle Paul. Despite the hardships of his own imprisonment and ailments, he weeps for the enemies of the cross, and devotes himself to lifting up communities in the name of Christ. Certainly, their realities did not always seem to match God's promise. Yet they embraced the unexpected, and followed God's call.

Despite the devastating realities we experience every day, perhaps the promise of God's kingdom is also unfolding for us in unexpected ways.

At the end of February, as Russian troops began invading Ukraine, the Ukrainian government set up a hotline called "Come Back From Ukraine Alive"—a hotline established not for their own people, but for Russian families trying to get information about their husbands, sons, and brothers sent off to fight.

Since February 24th, more than 6,000 calls from family members and friends, primarily in Russia but some from across Europe and the U.S., have been made to the "Come Back From Ukraine Alive" hotline.

One woman called and asked operators in Russian, "Hello, is this where one can find out if someone is alive?"

A hotline staff member spoke of another woman inquiring about her fiancé: "It touched me she was asking for forgiveness. She kept saying, 'Forgive us, we did not want to attack you. This is not our war. We did not want to do this.'"

Another hotline operator spoke to the deep sadness she feels for these people, many who hearken from the country that is invading her own.

“We will help find their relatives who were deceived and who, without knowing where and why they are going, find themselves in our country.”¹

What an extraordinary act of kindness and blessing, in the midst of such devastation.

When faced with dark realities, how do we hold fast to light of God’s covenant, to the Good News of Christ?

Lent gives us the opportunity to consider this challenge. To consider how we, like Abraham, can offer our questions and doubts to God, and make space to listen for his response. To consider how we, like Paul, can persevere through hardships and afflictions, and lift up our brothers and sisters. To consider how we can let go of the things of this earth that keep us from fulfilling God’s purpose for our lives.

Lent calls us to reflect on how we can turn toward God, and open our hearts and minds to the unexpected ways we may be called to grow God’s kingdom on earth, striving to imitate the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself up to suffering and death, in the light of God’s promise.

This journey can seem overwhelming and fraught with dangers. Sometimes we can clearly see the “enemies of the cross,” such as on our TV screens and social media news feeds, reflected in the face of one evil man. Other times the “enemies of the cross” may be harder to recognize: the evils of our own consumption, our negligence of those in need, our destruction of God’s creation, and our addictions to money, pleasure, recognition, and success.

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/07/europe/ukraine-hotline-russian-soldiers-intl-cmd/index.html>

In a world such as this, where do we begin?

In a letter to a fellow disciple in 1378, St. Catherine of Siena wrote, “He will provide the way and the means, such as you could never have imagined. Leave it all to Him, let go of yourself, lose yourself on the Cross, and you will find yourself entirely.”²

This message of letting go is as relevant for us today as it was centuries ago. Stephanie Spellers, Bishop Curry’s Canon for Evangelism and Reconciliation, speaks to this in her book, *The Church Cracked Open: Disruption, Decline, and New Hope for Beloved Community*. She says that letting go allows us to become people of blessing: “...that is, people who give our lives away for the sake of love,” people who choose “generosity over dominion, celebration over humiliation, mutuality over chauvinism, [people who] resist the way of empire, because it regards one culture and its practices, aesthetics, rules, and institutions as the best of all and ideal for everyone, and because it places human creation above the revealed will and way of God.”

Spellers says people of blessing “resist the urge to build up and hoard power, possession, and privilege, because—as Jesus showed us—real love gives itself away as bold, generous blessing to others.”

The people of Christ Church already bless others in so many ways. In how we lift each other up, in how we minister to those on the margins, in how we give generously of our God-given gifts. Yet, becoming people of blessing is a lifelong journey of transformation—one filled with ups and downs in the

² From “Saint Catherine of Siena,” by Johannes Jorgenson, published 2012 (original copyright 1938)

everyday tension between sin and sorrow, and our quest to let go and to imitate the example of Christ crucified.

Our journey toward the cross offers us unexpected ways to become people of blessing. Despite the temptation to become bitter and hard, to further move into our divided camps, to retreat to the safety of our own realities, we can, like Abraham and Paul, stand firm in the Lord's promises.

We will be imperfect in this quest. We will have questions and doubts. We will fumble and falter, just as the saints before us, succumbing to the self-centeredness of our humanity time and time again.

Yet we know Jesus will “transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory.” Jesus cries out, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem,” expressing his longing to time and again gather its children under his wing. In all our flaws and failings, along with our acts of blessing both big and small, God who is merciful loves us all the same—empowering us to let go, turn to Him, and follow where He leads, saying “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”