Sermons at Christ Church

Reaching Out in Faith.

Lent 2
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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."

What does God's big picture with me looks like? Abram seems to be asking. He has waited for so long for God's promises to come through. And it appears that nothing seems to be happening. Frustration, anxiety and fear have gripped Abram. He wonders if God will keep God's promise to him.

In the midst of his frustration and fear that he doesn't have an heir, God in a vision showed him the heavens and the stars with the promise that his descendants would be as uncountable as the stars of heaven. Abram believed that even though he had no son of his own, God's big picture with him would come to pass. Abram believed that God would keep God's promise to him.

Bear in mind that in spite of this strong belief that God will keep God's promises to him, Abram was still unsettled-and that alone created the anxiety producing fear which led him to interrogate God. This is the kind of fear that leads us to complain because we have lost focus on God's big picture with us.

You may wonder, why Abram was derisive of his nephew Eliezer of Damascus being his successor. Here was a man who was a tribal leader but didn't have a tribe of his own. Here was a man who felt he had no identity because he had no children of his own. Here was a man who was aware of God's promise but was clearly impatient because he felt he was running against time, and his frustration generated this fear that he would die without a successor.

Abram's frustration reminds me of these beautiful words by John O'Donohue "The deepest ache of the soul is the spiritual longing for connection and belonging. Nothing in creation is ever totally at home in itself-no thing is ultimately at one with itself." He too wanted to belong, he wanted some connection which Eliezer of Damascus couldn't give him.

As people of faith, we are not supposed to be ruled by fear nor should our frustration with God lead us to lose faith in God's promises to us. We don't have to be crippled by fear to the point where we cannot see the big picture.

There's always the invitation to look at God's big picture with us. There's always the invitation to look at what God wants to do with us-to change our own circumstances and that of others.

The gospel story is rich. You sometimes have to marvel at human beings and what we are capable of. On the surface, you would think that the Pharisees were looking out for Jesus by expressing their concern for his personal safety-Herod wants to kill you. As dire as their warning to Jesus may have been, Jesus wasn't afraid. He knew what his purpose was.

He was focused on God's big picture with him-the big prize that would set you and I free from the bondage of sin and death.

From the gospel, you get the sense that Jesus was in no mood to tolerate the hypocrisy and pretense of the Pharisees. Jesus' response reveals two things: First, it captures the essence of Jesus' prophetic ministry-a ministry which was about turning peoples life around, giving hope to the hopeless, providing meaning for people, lifting people up from the abyss of life and presenting God to us, not as a vindictive God, but a merciful and caring God who desires the best of everyone. Jesus reminds them that he is doing God's work and for that matter no human power can stop him.

Second, in the same breath in which Jesus prophesies that no prophet is ever killed outside Jerusalem, he broods over a city which has killed all the prophets who were sent to remind them of the enduring compassion of God and the importance of keeping the covenant between God and Abram. He broods over a city that is full of decay, he broods over a city that has lost its way, Jesus

broods over a city that is a pale shadow of itself. And then expresses God's divine longing for this city, how I wish I could gather you like a hen gathers her brood under her wings.

That is God's big picture with us.

There's a story of a work man who was leaving a factory after a day's work, and he was pushing a wheelbarrow out of the factory. Inside the wheelbarrow sat a very small package. He stopped by the security office, and a security guard asked him, what have you got in your wheelbarrow? Well, I've got a small box. The security guard said, well, I can see it's a small box but what have you got in it?" "You know the sawdust that's on the floor at the end of a working day, it's swept and thrown away. Well, I needed some so I put it in a box and I'm going to take it home for some work I have at home"

The security guard then said "Open the box." He opens the box, sawdust. And he said "Alright, thank you." Second day, same thing, third day, same thing, forth day, same thing, fifth day, he's pushing a wheelbarrow, inside the wheel barrow is a small box. It's the same security guard. The guard says, "It's you again. What do you have in the wheelbarrow?" "Well, I've got the same thing as I got the other 4 days, sawdust."

The security guard says "Open it." He opens it and it was sawdust. The security guard then said to him "I just got this feeling that you're steeling something. Look, why don't you tell me what you are stealing, and I promise, I won't report you." The work man then said "Alright. I'm stealing wheelbarrows."

The problem is, you and I can be so preoccupied with the small package, the often discomforts of our lives, the tragedy that we experience that we miss the big picture. We miss what God wants to do with us because our hypocrisy, pretense and sheer ignorance has blinded us.

What does God want to do with you and me? I love Lent. Lent is about walking in the wilderness and knowing that you are not supposed to be afraid-even though the wilderness is scary. Lent is about the peeling off of the old skin to reveal the beauty that is hidden from plain view. Lent is that one liturgical season that reminds me of how broken we. How blind we. How deaf we. How sick we are. How lame we are. How hungry we are. How thirsty we. How undeserving we are-the

sinners that we are. Men and women who dwell in darkness-people who are walking Jerusalem-and Jesus broods over us in just the same way he broods over ancient Jerusalem.

We all need salvation as I do-and Lent becomes our common path towards a self-realization that destroys any hubris in us, opens us up to walk humbly with God and to be believe that God will keep God's word, even if it takes much longer than we expect.

Lent helps me to understand that it was because of your brokenness and mine that Jesus became an agent of human transformation. But that agency isn't limited to Jesus alone. Both you and I are capable of being God's agents, in spite of our brokenness. And that is what makes our walk with God all the more important.

The one image that greatly captures my attention is Abram standing outside and looking at all the stars. Tonight, if you have some time, please go out and look at all the stars, admire the beauty of the cosmos and then ask yourself two questions, what does God want to do with me? What is God's big picture with me?

The season of lent is like being in the wilderness. And those wilderness moments lay bare the truth about human vulnerability, and because of that vulnerability we are easily drawn to the small things, to the point where we forget God's big picture with us.

Remember, God's big picture with us isn't any different from the response that Jesus gave to the Pharisees. Two other thoughts about Jesus' response, first, it was oriented towards God's work-which is human transformation, and two, it was grounded in fearlessness because he had confidence in the words of the psalm 27

The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom then shall I fear? *
the LORD is the strength of my life;
of whom then shall I be afraid?

Like Jesus, we cannot be afraid of God's big picture with us. Yes, there may be times when it would feel like being in the wilderness, but you cannot be afraid, nor let your wilderness frustrations get in the way of doing the difficult work of God. Beginning with God's relationship with Abram, God's desire, it seems to me, has always been to change human circumstance, not necessarily in pursuit of perfection but the ideal. God reaches out to us, even at the peril of God's life, to make this change possible, to make this ideal situation possible for everyone who is counted as a star or a grain of sand Lent helps me to see the Jesus, the agent of God's vision of a world in which you and I could be counted as children of God-because we are numbered among the stars of heaven and the sand at the shore. More importantly, you and I are part of God's covenant with Abraham and the covenant isn't about a piece of land but a heart that responds to God's love with faithfulness.

Lent, the season that helps us to understand that God doesn't have to use human misery or misfortune to prove that He is faithful. Lent assures us that in spite of all else, there will be an Easter morning. That is when we come to understand God's big picture with us. That is when God's big picture comes alive. God is faithful to the big picture, our task is to believe that God's big picture with us is possible.

Amen.