

Sermon March 13 2022 2nd Lent Rev. Brent Damrow

SCRIPTURE:

Luke 13:31-35:

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” He said to them, “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’ 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! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18:

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.’ But Abram said, ‘O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?’ And Abram said, ‘You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.’ But the word of the Lord came to him, ‘This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.’ He brought him outside and said, ‘Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’ And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness. Then he said to him, ‘I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.’ But he said, ‘O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?’ He said to him, ‘Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtle-dove, and a young pigeon.’ He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire-pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. 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.’

SERMON: “Questions and Answers” The Rev. Brent Damrow

Both jobs are enormous. Each of these two jobs carries huge responsibilities, bigger than any person should bear. Each of these jobs has the possibility to shape our culture and the outlook for generations who follow. They are jobs that are a lot to ask of anyone. The two jobs that came to mind, as I thought this week about Abram and Sarai and what was being asked of them, were presidents and astronauts.

Partly, because you see in both cases at the beginning of their calling, similar to the beginning here of Abram’s calling, they’re exposed to experiences to help them lean into the possibility and

the challenge of just how big their jobs are. For presidents, it's an intentional act. For astronauts, it's something that intervenes.

Did you know that 'president' literally means 'the one who sits before?' It's designed to connote someone who sits before a gathering, someone who convenes that gathering, but someone who is mindful of whom they sit before. They struggled to determine what they would call the leader of this country, and they knew what they didn't want to call the leader. They finally settled on 'president.' Sit before the people. Sit before challenges and opportunities. And as we've grown as a nation, the president now sometimes sits before the whole world.

I was intrigued by a tradition that's associated with our presidential office. To my understanding, it happens between the time of election and the time of inauguration. Presidents are whisked away. Literally, in the midst of their life, a helicopter lands next to them, gathers them inside, and simply sweeps them away. They are whisked away to the bunker in West Virginia, buried deep underground, where presidents are taken should war go horribly, should the nuclear option be involved.

And I can imagine as the presidents suddenly are surprised and whisked away here at the top of the mountain, thinking of all their plans and all of their power and all they want to be, that they're inspired by the beautiful landscape as they pass the ocean, the mountains of West Virginia, the cities they fly over – they're reminded of all the people that are in their care.

And then I imagine down in the confines of that bunker, shut off from the rest of the world as they are handed what we call 'the football,' the codes that could result in the annihilation of everything. I imagine how fast their world shrinks upon them, how they see the enormity of their job, how they understand that what they may be called to do transcends any plans that they might have made, any of their best laid strategies, even all of their training.

And beautifully, historians tell us, that almost always those leaders, about to be on the top of the world, find a healthy dose of humility interwoven with their fundamental responsibility. For most of them, they literally grow into the enormity of what's expected of them, often well beyond anything they could have imagined, forced to give up their smaller schemes for the bigger picture. Intentionally, this activity is designed to change their perspective beyond anything they had previously imagined, to the enormity of what their task contained.

Did you know the word 'astronaut' literally means 'one who is trained to fly a spacecraft?' One who is trained to operate perhaps one of the most spectacular and expensive pieces of equipment that humanity has ever imagined or created. Something literally designed to break boundaries, to leave this place for the stars. They go through long and rigorous training on how to use that spacecraft to explore and experiment, to search for answers to questions that we can't find here on earth, and to see how biology interacts with things beyond our atmosphere. They are subject to rigorous training and countless details about how to do their experiments, how to fly that spacecraft, what to do in the case of any number of a thousand contingencies.

And yet, as impressive as the vehicles are, as extensive as their training is, the one thing all astronauts agree on is that nothing compares to what those astronauts discover when they look, not

inside their spacecraft, but outside. When they see themselves among the stars, impossibly long horizons, stars too many to count. This seemingly huge planet we call home suddenly a tiny dot of life in the vastness of space. Humbleness, yes. Openness, absolutely. But amazement every time.

So while NASA focuses relentlessly on plans and training and details, as they should, what ends up being the most transformative thing is what is foisted upon them when they least expect it. Astronaut after astronaut talks less about the spacecraft or lessons learned, less about their own plans or training or goals. Gushing instead over and over again about how what they saw changed everything. How it both made them feel so small and so huge at the same time. How the possibilities just poured forth in ways. And just like those presidents, they know that they now have a role to play in that hugeness of the thing called space.

And yet, with all due respect to both of those roles and to all of their complexities, I've got to be honest. I don't think that either of them actually compares to what was asked of Abram and Sarai. After all, the person sending them on their mission to and fro, here and there, was God's own self. And when you are commissioned and called by God to do something, I've got to imagine the pressure was big. But both of them turned out to be paragons of faith. When God says get up and go to a land I'm going to show you, they got up and went.

Deliverance after deliverance from the Negev to Egypt to Bethel. Wealth, prosperity, victory, rescue, blessing upon blessing. Every time something was demanded of them, they said here I am, and off they went. Every time they were imperiled, God showed up. And somehow they found their way through. Even sometimes despite their own bumbling, like the times that Abram tried to pass off Sarai as his sister (not a great idea).

And yet, in their names is what they both so desperately yearned for. And what had been not yet found in their family. 'Abram' means 'exalted father.' And 'Sarai' means 'princess' or 'strong woman.' In both cases, the sense of family was ingrained, not only in what God was asking them to do, but in the very way by which they were known. Exalted father. Princess, strong woman.

The child that they couldn't find, you see, they see as making full all those rewards that God keeps offering, and offered again in this passage. That offspring they understand to be *their* future, the fulfillment of *their* plans, of *their* understanding. And they've been on this path long enough, them answering God, responding, God responding, them answering, that they thought they'd figured it out. And yet, despite all they had done, they kept hitting the same roadblock, stopping short of what *they* really wanted, what their names proclaimed about who they would be to humanity. And so when God says in this passage: Abram, I'm about to give you another reward, Abram's had enough and he finally talks back.

It was fun reading a lot of commentaries this week. There are many who saw in Abram's response here, doubt. There were some who saw complaining in what Abram was doing: Hey God, I get this reward stuff, but have you forgotten? Hello? Some see critique. Some see desperation. But you know what? I think there is something in his question that reflects on all that they have been through together. All the past, all those roads taken in obedience, every time

God's delivered them in trouble. I see in this passage a relationship that allows for questions offered. And I think that Abram assumes an answer.

Now, in these times when so much seems beyond us, when the world seems much bigger, Abram gives us a great guide, as he often does, for how to start any conversation with God: "O Lord God." A wonderful place to start, whether those words are expressed in frustration or doubt, or whether they're expressed in admiration or appreciation. Start with your relationship with God, and the fact that the word 'Lord,' that some of us are uncomfortable with, really means the one who is in charge of everything, the one beyond everything, so I don't have to be. So whether you are deep in the pits or up on the mountaintop, if you need to talk to God and ask a question, start with 'O Lord God.'

You'll notice in both these questions, there's an interesting dance between Abram and God. Abram is stuck in the human way, the human questions about the plans and the process, and how is this going to work. You see, Abram maybe has already given up and thought, y'know, I've got to pick an heir and it's gonna be this guy over here, this distant relative that I can give all this wealth to. He says: God, how is this going to happen? Give me the plan. Give me the chart. And how does God answer? God brushes that question right off. God says: What you need is to look up. Look up at the stars. Look up and count the stars. Be overwhelmed by how many there are. And if you can count them all, that's going to be how many descendants you're going to have. If you can count the blessing of those stars, that's how many blessings I'm going to bring about through you.

When is the last time you went out on a perfectly starry night? When is the last time you were overwhelmed with something so beautiful and so huge, that made you feel so tiny, and yet compelled you into inspiration of what might be? For that's what God offered Abram on that day as an answer to his question -- that limitlessness of space.

And then it doesn't stop there. Abram in this passage doesn't say his catchphrase, which he says dozens of times in the Bible. Every time God says something crazy, Abram says: Here I am. You can search Genesis, and it doesn't say it in Genesis, but he actually does say it. It says Abram believed, which means that in his heart he knew it was going to happen. Which means in his heart he gave his way to going about this path. And God said that is righteousness, that is goodness.

And then God brings Abram back from looking at the heavens to looking at the earth. He says: All this I will give you. Possibilities on top of impossible possibilities. And Abram again says: God I've had too much. But he starts in the right way again. You'll notice that he says again: O Lord God. A great place to ground your conversation. God, how can this happen? Give me your plan. Tell me how we're going to accomplish it together. Give me a blueprint. Instead of giving an answer, God reminds Abram of a promise.

God says: Go and gather a bunch of animals, he says. And Abram knows exactly what that means, because in that time you took these animals, and it was a way of signing a covenant. A covenant between God and humanity. A covenant between one another. And Abram cuts them in half. That whole thing about cutting them in half, and fire going through, what that means is that

should either of us break this covenant, may we be consumed, just like these animals were. Can you imagine entering into a covenant with God? Can you imagine a job so big that you are entering into that covenant with God? Maybe not. But you know what? The beauty of this story is that God doesn't expect us to.

Notice what happens in this story. Suddenly realizing the enormity of it all, God puts Abram into a deep sleep. A deep sleep comes over Abram. A deep sleep when God is about to do something. It is the exact same word used when a deep sleep came over Adam, when Adam needed a partner in Genesis. It was a deep sleep so that God could accomplish giving Adam the partner that he so desperately needed. Now this deep sleep comes over Abram. Why? So that God can ratify this covenant. Why? So that God can pass through it all. Why? So that God can take the burden of the whole thing. The whole thing. Absolving Abram of that need to bear responsibility should he fall short. And when Abram woke up, the covenant was there. The impossible possibility was there. The hugeness of the task was before him, and yet Abram was able to get up and keep moving.

Friends, right now in this world, between the changes in the pandemic and between a war that none of us could imagine, in this moment where we are questioning what do we do about Ukraine, it is so much beyond us, what can we possibly do. The best place to start is with 'O Lord God.' The best place to start is remembering that in God's long arc of goodness, God does not promise that everything will be well in this moment, but it eventually will be well. And that what we are called to do is what Abram was called to do, which is what Jesus was called to do, which is what every faithful person has been called to do so far, is just to say: Here I am. And trust that we walk with God, and do what we can.

Presidents do what they can, even though they sometimes mess it up. Astronauts do what they can, even though they don't get the enormity of it. Abram did what he could, even if the Bible makes it perfectly clear that he is not perfect. Because we don't have to be perfect. God is.

What this passage gives us as a gift this morning is the chance to realize that what we do need to do is take it all in, and be overwhelmed, but in the possibility of what God is doing, and all we need to do is step forward and partner with him.

Do you remember that Abram didn't stay Abram for long? Abram became Abraham, which means 'Father of multitudes.' Sarai became Sarah, which as I understand the Hebrew translation, the difference with that is instead of just being a strong woman for her family, her strength is now throughout the whole nation, and all nations.

Friends, the world is big right now. My question for you is: What do we need to do what presidents do? To do what astronauts do? To do what Abram and Sarai did? Which is to step forward into this new land and new landscape, calling out 'O Lord God,' and simply walking in partnership with God's purpose.

And here's what I wonder. I wonder, as we step into this new reality, what will your new name be? How will your courage, your humility and your openness to all that's beyond so

fundamentally change you that people come to know you differently? And when they do, they will know God is at work.

Amen.