

**Lent 2**  
**March 17, 2019**

**In the name of God, who in Jesus,  
 taught us the meaning of unconditional Love.  
 AMEN**

This is a TEST to see if you were paying attention to the Scripture readings we heard this morning. Did you hear in the Epistle...Paul's letter to the Philippians... where he said that there were some whose minds are set on earthly things...in fact, he said...their god is their belly?!!! Well, thank goodness that doesn't apply to any of us, since WE all know we are in the season of Lent and so it is the time to give up good things for the belly like booze and candy!!

Well now, quite seriously... It is quite striking to me that in each of our scripture readings today there is something rather fearful that must be faced. In the first reading from the Old Testament, Abram has to wrestle with his own inner doubts about the future course of his life. In the Epistle to the new church community at Philippi, Paul warns the church against those who may in fact be enemies to the new faith. And then in the Gospel, some Pharisees come to Jesus and warn him that he is in danger because Herod is plotting against him. ///

And I think// how apt this is for us to hear today here at St. Cyprian's. Because really, it is easy to be anxious as we try to be faithful to the personal challenges we each may have in so many different ways. One has relationship issues, another serious health problems, another deep grief, another confusion. Losses and heartaches of every kind that can make us fearful to some degree. And so, it certainly can be a challenge for us to strive to deepen our spirituality and indeed, be faithful witnesses to God, even though we do have our own anxieties and worries to deal with.

I would like us to go back to today's First reading, which was from Genesis, where God and Abram are talking. It goes sorta' like this: "Abram...listen up! This is God talking." The passage we have from Genesis is classic. Here we see Abram, the seemingly towering founding figure of a future people, Abram... nervous and insecure! Think of it... In our Book of Common Prayer, in Eucharistic Prayer C, which we are using during Lent, we say, "Lord God of our fathers; God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ: Open our eyes to see your hand at work in the world about us." That's this Abraham. Not only is it a powerful prayer, but notice that Abraham is right up there as a real heavyweight in the history of our relationship with God. I guess I should mention that I am speaking of him today as Abram because that is his name in this part of the book of Genesis. His name is not changed to Abraham until two chapters later when we have the wonderful story of Abram and his wife having a child when they are nearly a hundred years old...In fact, Chapter 17 begins with the statement that "When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord God appeared to him and said ' I am God Almighty.'" And he went on to say that not only would Abram's name be changed to Abraham but that his wife's name also would be changed from Sarai to Sarah AND that she would bear a child. And what did Abram now do with this news from God? In Chapter 17 of Genesis we read that he fell on his face and laughed, thinking ...this is absurd. In fact, Sarai laughed too. What was God up to?

On a very much smaller scale, I surely can identify with this feeling of...what IS God up to?

We moved here to St. Augustine almost 30 years ago. For the first two years or so that we lived here, I prayed intentionally to be called back to the Northeast, to not be so far away from everything familiar and from our son and his family in NYC or from our daughter in Washington, D.C. I wondered ...what happened? How did I get HERE? A Yankee woman priest, doubly not welcomed at the time. Well, God simply does stay in charge. As I was becoming more and more involved in THIS Diocese, not the one I had left, and became more and more accepted as the Assistant Priest at Trinity Episcopal Church, which I served for ten years before my life here at St. Cyprian's, guess what?... our son and his family moved to Orlando, and our daughter moved to St. Augustine. I could never have orchestrated these providential moves. I could never have dreamed it. One of our women in the Cyprian Women group would say, "It's a God thing." // And so it is!

Let's go back to today's story of Abram and God talking. How beautiful...We hear the voice of God making every effort to reassure Abram. He says, "Do not be afraid, Abram; I am your shield." Can't you just hear these words being said so lovingly..."Do not be afraid; I will be your shield." Like a bridge over troubled waters. But, interestingly, these words do not seem to have the slightest effect in calming Abram's fears. We very quickly hear what Abram is really focused on. He says, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless? You have given me no offspring." God tries again to reassure him, and says "No one but your very own issue shall be your heir."

Well, it seems that even this is not enough. The inner child in Abram will not be comforted by words. Haven't you experienced that? Something else is needed. Maybe a rose, ...something tangible handed to him, something more concrete than words. So God takes him outside. And Abram stands under the dome of the desert sky at night. And we know how it is that in such a place, the true glory of the stars can be seen. The Lord says, "Look toward heaven, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Abram gazes upwards. /// // I hope everyone here has had that experience of being in some wide open space, where it is so utterly quiet that you really have a mystical experience as you look at God's great beyond. I think I have mentioned about the little house we still have in Vermont. Well, it is so quiet there and so unpolluted, that the sky is like a beautiful crocheted lace doily with so many many stars, that the night sky only appears through the holes. So, I can imagine Abram standing on the back deck of our Vermont house, so to speak, with the majesty of the night sky having a calming effect on his worries about the future, and seeing more stars than could ever be counted, and hearing the Lord say to him, "So shall your descendants be!" ////////////// Well, for a moment, Abram IS reassured. We read that ... "He believed the Lord." God continues to bolster Abram's still fragile trust. He reminds him, "I am the Lord who brought you from the land of Ur of the Chaldeans." It would seem that God is appealing to Abram's past confidence in his decisions and actions. Amazing for us to read about Abram/slash Abraham, because really, once again, God's reassurance is not enough for him. It is not enough for him to hear that God promised him this land. Instead, there is a desperate request for guarantees.//////// How like us! Abram says, "O Lord God, how am I to KNOW?"

Once again I see this scripture passage today as utterly appropriate for us. Don't we know this from our own friends and family. Some may say, "How are we supposed to know that stepping out in faith is the right thing?" Others may advise, "Well, just wait and see." And some simply say, "I am not sure," as Abram said.

When Abram says to God, "O Lord God, How shall I KNOW?" there is no direct response. //////////Perhaps because it is simply not given to us to know the future in the way that Abram...and each of us, probably,

wants so very much to know. From what we can see here, God moves Abram beyond words, beyond arguments, beyond his efforts to think logically. Abram moves into ritual, into acting out his fears, offering them to God from whom he cannot quite get the certainties his fearful humanity longs for. He lays out the sacrifice.....A heifer...a female goat...a ram...a turtledove...a young pigeon. Birds of prey swoop down, symbolic of Abram's own dark brooding doubts and fears. The scarlet fire of the desert sun dies away. Darkness sweeps over Abram, taking him into a troubled sleep. Our reading said, "A deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him."

We know how that is. It just seems that there are some inner voices that cannot seem to be quieted by words of comfort. Some anxieties, some uncertainties, some demons even, that will not go away. Fear, guilt, discouragement, depression, sorrow, utter fatigue. We encounter them at different times in our own journeys through tracts of desert. But,.... as with Abram, we WILL receive Grace from God, even though we still wrestle with our demons. The grace may not absolutely banish our deepest anxieties, but it does give us sufficient strength not to succumb to them. And at the end of the day, we sleep, sometimes gently, ///but sometimes, like Abram, encountering a deep and frightening darkness. // But always there dawns a new day, a new day for us to continue our journeying, and always our God is calling us to deeper trust in the truth of God, leading us to things and places far better than we could ask or imagine. And so our Scripture reading concludes with the Lord's Covenant with Abram. "////// And he makes his covenant with us, "You will be my people and I will be your God." //////////////

If only, in our troubled times, we could hear these comforting words and have them be absolutely real for us. "You will be my people and I will be your God!" And hear how it is said, though a bit differently in today's psalm..."The Lord is the strength of my life...what then shall I fear? Be strong, and he will comfort your heart. Wait patiently for the Lord."

On Ash Wednesday, a week and a half ago, we began Lent together, with some of us here to receive ashes and then to go on to receive Holy Communion together. It was a Holy time, truly a time of trust and sharing, and I would say certainly Sacramental, because in that service we experienced outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, which we know is from God; it was a special time. To share in our Eucharist after looking in the eyes of another as we shared in the symbol of our mortality in the ashes placed on our foreheads, is profound and deeply moving.

This morning, when we turn to our Holy Eucharist, our sacrifice, our offering of praise and thanksgiving, may we be truly grateful for the offering of God's love, known to us in Jesus, the Christ. After all...We have it a lot easier than Abram did. We don't have to offer a heifer...a female goat...a ram...a turtle dove...a young pigeon. All WE have to offer is ourselves. And as with Abram...God will take care of the rest!

AMEN