

Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

Reverend Dr. Daris Bultena

February 28, 2010

2nd Sunday in Lent

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

¹After 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." ²But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" ³And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." ⁴But 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." ⁵He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." ⁶And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

⁷Then he said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess." ⁸But he said, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" ⁹He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." ¹⁰He 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. ¹¹And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

¹²As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.

¹⁷When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. ¹⁸On 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,"

Luke 13:31-35

³¹At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." ³²He 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. ³³Yet 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.' 34Jerusalem, 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! 35See, 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.'"

“Pulchritude”

Story One – Part One

Jerusalem looms large. Jesus is headed towards Jerusalem. It is the seat of power—it is the symbolic seat of the covenant and the very place in which all the action will take place. The motivation of the Pharisees is unclear. We know that in other places in the Gospels those Pharisees are not cast in a positive light. Indeed, we usually encounter them as the ones who are trying to trap Jesus or catch him in with a legal technicality. In their worst, we even see them attempting to do away with Jesus.

In this instance, it is the Pharisees that come to Jesus and warn him against Jerusalem. They warn him that Herod is there and looking for him. Herod is a dangerous sort and is a political threat. The Pharisees are clear here; Herod not only has it out for Jesus but wants to do away with him. This is no friendly character. Jesus knows full and well that he is the very one who has had John the Baptist murdered. Herod does not play well with others.

He is to be feared. Jesus calls Herod a “fox.” He says, “Go and tell that fox for me, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow...” A confrontational Jesus that does not back away or hide out—that is the Jesus of the Gospels.

Story Two – Part One

In the 2006 movie, “Akeelah and the Bee,” it is the word “pulchritude” that young Akeelah spells wrong following her victory as the

Crenshaw Middle School winner of their first ever spelling bee. Crenshaw, a predominantly black school in South Los Angeles, is being visited by Dr. Larabee, a visiting English professor, who tests Akeelah with some really difficult words. Right away he recognizes her gift.

Akeelah wants Dr. Larabee to coach her, despite her misspelling of the word pulchritude. Akeelah discovers that she misses the spelling of the word because she fails to recognize its Latin root word of pulcher and hence the “ch” rather than a “k.”

Dr. Larabee does coach Akeelah and along the way he teaches her more than spelling. He imparts life to her and grows her understanding of not only the world but herself. In a wonderful scene in Dr. Larabee’s home office, Akeelah reads aloud a quotation. In the movie the quotation is not credited, but it actually is from Marianne Williamson’s book, “A Return to Love.”

Akeelah reads aloud the words, “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.”

Story Three – Part One

The encounter between Abram, who we know better as Abraham, is portrayed as a divine encounter and conversation with God. It is a wonderful scene as we hear God blessing Abram and pledging to him that he will have descendents.

God takes Abram outside and invites him to behold the clear night sky. Out there and gazing up into the heavens, the stars are so many that one cannot even begin to count them. Everywhere the eye lands there are stars, and stars, and more stars. God’s promise is that Abram can believe it that his descendents will be more numerous than those stars.

Abram, rather than receiving that news with joy, appears to neither trust the promise nor the God who makes that promise. Abram moves right into questioning God and asking for a sign of how he will know it to be true. The stark reality of it is that God is blessing Abram and rather than Abram being grateful he is uncooperative.

God wants to bless him, but he is too busy not trusting the blessing to receive it. Could that be our reality?

Story Four – Part One

On Wednesday at morning chapel for the children who are part of our weekday program, the kids were—how can we put it—energetic. Yes, they were energetic. They came into the room full of energy and sat here in the pews and made plenty of sounds and caused a good amount of ruckus. I have come to expect that such is how children are and it is part of the good creation of God. It does not throw me. I talk a little louder or move into a whisper so that they have to be quiet in order to hear.

It seems to work. Millie Kreider from Deer Creek Harmony Church is my assistant for chapel. She was running the music on Wednesday. She is an inspiration and a great help in our effort to provide continued worship opportunities for all the children.

After chapel was finished the other day, and all the children had returned to their classrooms, Millie and I debriefed the experience. She asked me if I noticed the moment when the kids came together and the commotion stopped. In fact, I had not noticed when it happened. I was just doing my thing as it was and did not notice when that actual moment came.

She told me that the children hushed and were silent when I announced clearly and emphatically, “God is here.” I proclaimed the simple but stunning truth: “God is here.”

Story One – Part Two

“Go and tell that fox, today I am casting out demons and curing...”

Jesus is not deterred. Jesus is not frightened off. Jesus is not running away to hide. Jesus is not changing his course of action. You see, we know what Jesus is about. He announced it that day in the synagogue in Nazareth. He announced as he read it from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news...to proclaim...to release.” He rolls up the scroll, sits down, and makes a clear announcement. “Today this is fulfilled in your hearing.”

It was the core of who Jesus was. It was his purpose. He was clear on that purpose. So when he announces on this occasion to the Pharisees, “Go and tell that fox today I am curing and casting out,” there is no surprise there. The threat of Herod does not throw him off of his mission. The threat of Herod does not alter his course of staying on track with his purpose.

His purpose is God’s purpose. It is about living out that call. When that threat comes along, then what? The purpose is still intact and it is still what forms the course of action. It is the point of touch with us. As we brush up against those threats in our living—as we brush up against the Herods of this world, whether they be actual people or situations, the question is will be deterred from our purpose? Or does that purpose of God’s mission for our lives so define who we are that it alone drives us?

Jesus was clear about his purpose. Threat. Herod. Run away. Get side tracked. No. No way. Casting out demons. Curing. Today. On track. Forward. That is Jesus. That is the call.

Story Two – Part Two

That quotation re-emerges in almost the final scene of the moving. Akeelah and one other contestant remain. In the break, Dr. Larabee quotes the passage to her. “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.”

Akeelah demonstrates her compassion for her competitor. He recognizes that. And they together decide to go for it and attempt to both spell every word correctly. When the moment comes that would make Akeelah a co-champion the word that is given to her to spell is the word “pulchritude.” Of course, she spells the word correctly.

The irony of the story is that she not only spells the word correctly but she also defines it. She even tells the audience where the word comes from. She embodies the word pulchritude. It means “physical beauty, appeal.” It means beautiful. It has that connotation of what we would call inner beauty. A beauty with a depth that cannot be seen by only looking on the appearance—that is pulchritude.

It was her ability to conquer that fear that she was powerful and successful that made it so. “It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.” She allowed that light to emerge. When we allow that light to shine—to emerge—there is beauty to us. Pulchritude.

Story Three – Part Two

God bless us. But we do not trust it. We doubt it. We do not think it can be true. It was Abram’s story. It is our story. See, that story is as old as the covenant itself. It is about faithfulness.

Yes, it is about faithfulness, but it is not about our faithfulness but God’s. The real issue is that God is faithful and God can be trusted to keep God’s promises. The struggle is we do not embrace that nor do we trust it to be true.

Our reality—our sinfulness is that we know ourselves well enough to know that all too often we do not follow through on what we say we are going to do or what we promise. We know, in that deep quiet reassesses of our being that we cannot always be counted on. Lent is this time where we own that ashness of our existence. It is a time where we are called to see that in order to see the larger truth that such is not God.

God is wholly other. God will be faithful and true. We can dare to trust in the trustworthiness of God. God is seeking to bless us—oh beloved, baptized ones—and God can be trusted. The faithful God.

Story Four – Part Two

God is here! God is here! In our lives—oh, God is here. It was the news that hushed the children, and dare I say that we are to pause long enough in order to take in that awesome news. Yes, in our lives—God is here.

With God here we can stay on course. We can boldly live that purpose that we have been given in Christ. We can live that purpose—not with fear and fright—but with boldness and bravery. God is here. And in that reality is the truth that the light is in us—it is brighter and stronger and more beautiful than we can comprehend. God places that in us and sets us to success and power and clarity.

But we will have to know that this God can be trusted—even in those difficult times and those struggles—in those moments when it seems impossible this God can be trusted. Abram, old and childless, had a hard time hearing and trusting that promise of descendants greater than the countless stars.

Yet, Millie observed it. She observed it in that group of children. They claimed the presence—they claimed the holy presence of God in that

**moment in their lives and it hushed them—almost took their breath way.
Such is what the beauty of God does—it has incredible pulchritude. Amen.**