

FAITH OR FEAR?

Gen 15:1-12,17-18

Psalm 27

Luke 13:31-35

Philippians 3:17--4:1

Can you remember ever living in a time when there was so much fear in people?

The [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) says the global prevalence of [anxiety and depression](#) increased by 25% in the first year of the [COVID-19 pandemic](#). (From what I see here in Honolulu, I think the percentage was probably much higher.)

The scientific brief released by the [United Nations \(UN\)](#) agency said one explanation for the increase is unprecedented stress caused by the social isolation resulting from the pandemic.

Loneliness, fear of infection, suffering and death for oneself and loved ones, grief following bereavement, and financial worries were all cited as factors leading to anxiety and depression.

Our scriptures for this Sunday in the Lenten season - as we seek to follow the journey of Jesus to the cross, will encourage us to live by faith rather than be controlled by fear.

In the first reading in Genesis 15, Abram had reason to be afraid. He was getting old, and he still had no heir by his wife Sarah. How could he continue to trust the God who had promised him many heirs when evidence was growing in his mind that it probably wasn't gonna happen?

How would God deal with this growing fear?

We're told the Word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision. That word said, "Don't be afraid, Abram. I am your shield. Your reward will be very great."

Abram's response? He protested this promise! "Really, God? No heir yet!!! It's getting too late for that to happen. A slave born in my house is going to have to be the "heir."" Abram was saying in so many words, "I'm not sure I can believe in your promise anymore."

God countered Abram's protest with reassurance. God said again, "No, you will have a son coming from your own body that will be your heir."

Then God made an interesting move. He brought Abram outside and said, "Look toward heaven - count the stars if you can! So shall your descendants be."

I love what theologian and author Walter Brueggemann said here in his Genesis commentary. He asked, "How can a multitude of stars assure Abram of a promise of a son?"

It wasn't human reason that convinced him. Rather, "in looking at the stars, it was **a primal awareness that God is God** that moved him."

Abram needed a renewed awareness that **God is God** in order to keep trusting in the promise, in order to let go of fear and to have faith again. We all need that renewed awareness at various times. Out here in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, when we can get away from city lights, we have fabulous spots for star gazing!

I'll never forget a trip Al and I got to make a number of years ago to the top of Mauna Kea on the Big Island. Not only was it extremely humbling to be on top of that magnificent mountain - but then to look up at the heavens after the sun went down and see the stars starting to peek out - it was breathtaking. I felt tinier than the tiniest ant.

And so Abram believed the Lord, we're told. And the Lord reckoned him as righteous.

Walter Brueggemann says that when the Lord considers someone righteous, it means "the person trusts in God's future and lives assured of that future **even in the deathly present.**"

The promise of an heir and land was then solemnized with a covenant on God's part, a dramatic commitment that involved the sacrifice of animals - probably signifying something like "may this cutting happen to me if this promise is not fulfilled."

If we were to read further in Genesis, we would find that Abram had to wait even longer for these promises to be fulfilled. In fact, the land promise - although it would happen, it wouldn't be in Abram's generation. Hopefully he was learning that fear focuses on the delay. Faith trusts that God can be trusted.

I was excited when I saw Psalm 27 as today's psalm, because people around the world through the Daily Texts devotionals have been praying Psalm 27 for the people of Ukraine and Russia. It, too, addresses faith versus fear.

Here's the Message version of the first three verses:

*Light, space, zest—
that's God!*

*So, with him on my side I'm fearless,
afraid of no one and nothing.*

2

*When vandal hordes ride down
ready to eat me alive,
Those bullies and toughs
fall flat on their faces.*

3

*When besieged,
I'm calm as a baby.
When all hell breaks loose,
I'm collected and cool.*

In the first six verses, which are a profession of faith, what does the psalmist show us about faith?
Faith does not spare us from trouble.
Faith equips people to live with courage and hope.
God is the source of life and the sustainer of life.

Obviously the psalmist is suffering some kind of trouble from enemies. We don't know if he actually sought refuge in the Temple, or if he was metaphorically seeking refuge through prayer and worship.

He was definitely seeking the presence of the Lord through prayer. Verses 7-12 are a prayer. Seeking God's face is a way of saying "Let's have some deep communication."

Listen to the psalmist's pleas:

Hear me when I cry
Be gracious
Answer me
Do not hide
Don't turn me away in anger
Don't cast me off
Don't forsake me

This intimate communication results in the psalmist being able in verse 13 to again make a profession of faith: "I believe that I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." Hope has returned!

And then in verse 14 he exhorts anyone listening: "Wait for the Lord and be strong! Take heart and wait for the Lord!" Sounds like a message for Abram. Sounds like a message for the Ukrainians and for the Russians that are unwillingly caught under Putin's madness. Sounds like a message for us...

Turning to Luke, we find Jesus in a spot where he could be tempted to respond in fear. How would you respond if you heard someone was planning to kill you? Fear? Faith?

Did this threat deter Jesus from the journey he was on that would come to a head in Jerusalem?

Note the competing desires operating in this rather short paragraph.

Some pharisees wanting Jesus to go to a safe place
Herod wanting Jesus killed
Jesus wanting to continue on his way to Jerusalem
Jesus wanting to shelter and protect Jerusalem
Jerusalem would have none of it!

Jesus doesn't let fear win! In the power of the Holy Spirit he keeps uppermost in his mind and heart the mission God has sent him on.

Reading this short passage leaves us with a question. Who will end up killing Jesus?

The Pharisees think it could be Herod.

Herod probably thinks it will be Herod. (Remember what he did to John the Baptist...)

Jesus seems to **hope** for a positive response from Jerusalem (hence the "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord") - but rather **expects** the history they have of killing God's prophets to repeat itself...

Can we see - here in this brief passage - the deep love and commitment Jesus had for God and for people - for us? With the things that were going on, he could have justifiably responded in fear but he didn't. He kept the faith!

In Philippians 3, we have yet one more example of someone who responded in faith rather than fear. Paul is writing the Christians in Philippi from prison. He wasn't in jail because he was a criminal paying for legitimate crimes. He had been jailed because of his faith.

Yet he could confess - as Psalm 27 does - that faith in God's only Son, Jesus Christ does not spare one from trouble. But that faith does equip a person to live with courage and hope, no matter what comes. Because they have the big picture! They remember God is God!

Paul could see that there were many people surrounding the Christians in Philippi were enemies of the faith. They were living in ways that were in opposition to the way of the cross. The description Paul gave of those enemies of the faith reminded me of people who had given in to the temptations Jesus triumphed over in the wilderness.

Serve your own ends first, your obsessions, your creature comforts, your addictions. Do whatever it takes to get ahead, no matter if its fair, or legal, no matter who you have to step on to make it happen. Be a star instead of a servant!

It's almost as if Paul metaphorically is taking them outside to look at the stars. The Message version says: "But there's far more to life for us. We're citizens of high heaven!" People, your God is God! God of the high heavens. Creator of all this!

He goes on to remind them of the big picture! "We're waiting the arrival of the Savior, the Master, Jesus Christ, who will transform our earthy bodies into glorious bodies like his own. He'll make us beautiful and whole with the same powerful skill by which he is putting everything as it should be, under and around him."

God is God! God is putting everything as it should be, under and around him, in Christ.

And then in verse 1, it's almost as if he's sharing lessons learned by Abram and from the psalmist, and from Jesus. "Don't waver. Stay on track, steady in God."

Have faith! Don't fear!

There's a song that's fairly new, written by Fionan De Barra and Keith and Kristyn Getty that's entitled, "Consider the Stars." If you have access to looking it up online, I encourage you to do so. I find myself quietly singing some of the phrases when I take our dog out at night and have time to gaze up at the stars from our yard while he's doing his business.

I especially love these lines:

Consider the stars in the sky;
When it is darkest they shine the brightest
Consider the stars in the sky
In every anguish, Oh, child take courage

Do not be afraid
Do not be afraid
He who made all of this, and who holds all of this,
Holds you in his hands.