

Stronghold

Second Sunday of Lent

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Texts: Genesis 15.1-12,17-18
 Psalm 27
 Philippians 3.17-4.1
 Luke 13.31-35

“The Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?” The Psalms throughout Lent give us images of God as Shelter, God as Stronghold. Each week a different image is added to the litany, all on a similar theme but each with its own contour. Stronghold, for instance, often carries a military association. It is a fortified location that is easily defended like a cave in the side of a mountain. As a metaphor, strongholds are the places where we seek protection. They are the places where we hide when we feel ourselves in danger.

The Pharisees in the gospel of Luke today warn Jesus that he is on the brink of just such a time in his ministry. They advise him against taking his message to Jerusalem. Instead they suggest he find a stronghold (if you will) where he can protect himself from Herod who is looking to kill him. But Jesus won't be driven by fear. He knows he is walking into the line of fire. This has been the fate of all the prophets who have dared to hold up a mirror to those in power, challenge their place of privilege, and call into question the methods by which they maintain that position (precisely through threats of violence as Herod has just issued against Jesus).

Jesus saw Herod for the fox that he was... scheming, dirty-handed, and manipulative. Jesus does not tremble before Herod as if he were some mighty lion; neither does he claim such an image for himself. Clearly God was the stronghold of Jesus' life. He did not live by fear. And yet that stronghold for Jesus was not a place of retreat and protection. This is where Gordon was working with us last week in reflecting on what it means to say that God is our shelter in Psalm 91. Jesus does not turn to God to protect him from confrontation, but neither will he engage those confrontations with political and religious leaders in Jerusalem on their terms. He has no desire to threaten or coerce them.

When Jesus stands and looks out over Jerusalem his heart breaks. And not just for his own people – the ones who have welcomed him and embraced his message. His heart also breaks for the ones who will get swept up in the crowds and the ones who will disappoint and betray him. Barbara Brown Taylor, speaking on this text, said: “If you have ever loved someone you could not protect, then you understand the depth of Jesus’ lament. All you can do is open your arms. You cannot make anyone walk into them. Meanwhile, this is the most vulnerable posture in the world – wings spread, breast exposed – but if you mean what you say, then this is how you stand.”¹

Part of what I got this week was the cost to be the stronghold for someone in this way. It is a very different image from the military fortress, isn’t? There’s an incredible strength in this image. I was reading this week about a mother hen that was found charred and burned after a fire that swept through a farm, with live chicks chirping under her wings. It’s an image of strength and fierce loyalty but also of heart-breaking vulnerability. It brought me back to this passage in Genesis today.

I think this story from Genesis is a window into a moment when Abram was wrestling with the question of who or what would be the stronghold of his life. From the moment when Abram and Sarai’s story opens in chapter 12, Abram has been remarkably willing to trust God when promises of family and homeland were first offered to them at the age of 75. Since that promise was first issued the years and the mileage have been spinning past them. They’ve been from one side of the Arabian Peninsula to the other and down to Egypt and back again. Unless Abram shared Larry Mulder’s love of drawing red lines on maps (if you don’t know what I’m talking about look back at the article in Tuesday’s Holland Sentinel about a speech Larry gave to the chamber of commerce on Monday) I would imagine a certain exhaustion was beginning to take hold. It was a rather far-flung promise to begin with, but it must have seemed even further from reach than it did when God first issued it. What I wonder is how you sustain a sense of faith and trust in God as the stronghold of your life when everything around you - all of the facts of your life - challenge the claim that God’s promises could ever be fulfilled.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Christian Century*, February 25, 1986.

When you look at this passage closely, I think one piece of the answer is the willingness to speak the truth and voice your questions. Abram's been pretty quiet and accepting up until this protest in chapter 15. I think there can be a fair bit of pressure in certain religious circles to do just that: to accept in quiet ways the suffering of your life. When we do that we run the risk of reducing the promises of God to empty platitudes: "It must be God's will," or "It will all work out ok in the end." That is not what happens for Abram. He forges the relationship of trust with God through the questions and protests that have been haunting his mind. Nothing else changes between the first time in our passage that God issues the promise and the second. There's no convincing proof made – no sudden pregnancy announced. The circumstances of Abram's life are precisely the same.

Somehow the questions in Abram's mind, once he voiced them, grew quiet and made space in his heart to rest and trust God in the core of his being. It's a mystery how those moments of conversion happen – something just shifts in the ways that you see. For Abram, it was this vision of a face to face conversation with the Lord. It's not a promise that all will be well and life will be easy (as Gordon pointed out last week). In fact God goes to great lengths in this bizarre ritual in the second half of the vision to bring Abram in on what Jesus reveals in the gospel of Luke: trusting God as the stronghold of your life brings you to places of deep vulnerability and grief. In the verses we didn't read, God shows Abram the centuries of slavery and suffering that his descendents will endure.

A number of years ago I heard Nikki Giovanni being interviewed on NPR talking about the inspiration she draws from a recording she has of the Fisk Jubilee Singers. The Fisk Jubilee Singers were started in 1871 by nine young people who wanted to save the newly founded Fisk University. During the time of depression after the Civil War and reconstruction period, these boys started singing what was at that time called the Cabin Songs of their grandmothers. They are credited with bringing these Spirituals to the attention of the world. Giovanni was most captivated by the song: "Lord, I want to be a Christian". She imagined these slaves gathering together to try to find a way to forgive. These were plaintiff's songs. The history of slavery is there. The anger and the suffering is real. But if they can find a way to be a Christian in this midst of that suffering then they will have elevated themselves in this world.

She went on to say that the reason she loves that song is because that is what Christ wants for us: to find a way to forgive yourself and those around you and to elevate the human experience. Then they played the song, and when it was done she said – “Can’t you see that as a testimony? Someone would stand up and say ‘I want to be a Christian’ and someone else would say ‘I want to be more holy.’ The spirit becomes contagious until the whole room is singing ‘I want to be like Jesus’.” Nothing in their circumstance changed, but something in their spirit shifted as the questions and anger were quieted and the trust and hope began to rise up in them.

I think that is what Paul was getting at in Philippians: the importance of surrounding ourselves with people who help us make those shifts. Yes, we need people who make space for us to give voice to our questions, to name our suffering, and who understand the profound vulnerability that comes with being human. But we also need people who understand where our citizenship lies and from where our help comes.

The Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?