

Sermon 3-17-2019

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Luke 13:31-35

Lent 2

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**When you ask someone to marry you, no small gesture will do**, and so not to be outdone, I invoked the entire universe to help me to ask Meghan to marry me.

You see, I bought a star. Actually I bought two. The David and Meghan stars. Side by side, right off the handle of the big dipper.

I have always been fascinated with stars. I loved learning about constellations, and simply looking up and watching the stars, hundreds and millions of miles away and standing in awe and wonder of a world and galaxies more numerous than I could imagine.

Stars became a part of Meghan and I's story. We would go star-gazing on dates. Mainly because it was a very cheap date (there's some free advice!). But also because we would share that awe and wonder together as we stared into the vastness of creation.

So I had a plan, and the ring, and all I needed was the date.

And then, as a act of divine intervention, I was at work, and I felt that I heard clearly as if someone was speaking to me "Ask her this Sunday..."

It was all set. I ever had the line picked out. I present the certificate of a named star system, would proudly kneel and say

*"Meghan, since our celestial bodies are side by side for eternity, I figured our earthly bodies should be as well. Will you marry me?"*

### **IT'S A TERRIBLE LINE.**

But that was only the start of my well-meaning plans utterly falling apart. Despite my divine inspiration that it was to happen on that Sunday evening, I checked out all the local "Star-gazing websites (YES, those exist) and they said definitively, that Sunday, June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2009 was one of the worst nights to star gaze in recently recorded history. It had a visibility of 0%. Overcast and cloudy. One site said simply "Try another night"

But I was undeterred. This was inspired. Clearly a miraculous front would move through and push the clouds away, right?

Wrong.

So I sat there on a blanket, pointing at an orange glowing sky, reflecting the light of surrounding street lights and so dense you couldn't see a single star. I was pointing out to Meghan what my favorite constellations were, or well, where they theoretically were, since we could see them.

But I STILL HAD THE Line!

I distracted Meghan with the nice plaque I had received with my purchase, and while she looked it over, I got the ring out and slipped onto one knee.

Perhaps it was Meghan's infatuation with the certificate. Perhaps it was my nerves, but after I delivered the line I had been rehearsing for weeks.

***Meghan, I figured since our celestial bodies are side by side for eternity, our earthly bodies should be as well. Will you marry me?***

And I hear this: "What's that?"

She hadn't heard it. So I had to deliver the line again. And let me tell you. Its not a good line the first time. Its DEFINITELY not a good line the second time.

But I said it, and then Meghan was so excited that she got up and screamed. She started running around, but she didn't say anything. On her fourth lap around me, she stopped and said "Oh my gosh, I never said YES!"

Despite my best intentions, this was no fairytale engagement story. But so far, I think it is going to work out.

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Despite my botched attempt at fairytale romance, I still love the stars. When I hear about the numerous stars in Genesis 15 in God's promise to Abraham, I still feel and have felt a connection to that story.

Part of my fascination of the night sky is that I would look up and see the countless stars and felt connected to something bigger than myself. I loved this passage

about God keeping God's promise to Abram. This passage is the start of the covenant with Abraham that I preached on several weeks ago, about God's ever-expanding covenant, to bless all the families of the earth through the faithful servant of Abraham.

We know that God keeps the promise here about the stars, and indeed blesses Abraham's lineage as a great nation. It is one that keeps growing in each generation. Don't believe me? Well listen to this....

FATHER ABRAHAM, HAD MANY SONS, AND MANY SONS HAD FATHER ABRAHAM. I AM ONE OF THEM, AND SO ARE YOU.

VBS twitches are coming back!

But that song points to the fact that God does make good on this promise. We are a part of the story and stand in those spiritual offspring of Abraham. It ends well, right? Promise kept. It's easy to read this story and think "What an inspiring piece of Scripture. What a nice, neatly contained story about God fulfilling God's promise.

BUT NOT SO FAST.

You see, there are some verses left out of this reading from the lectionary, and we have said often before that what is left OUT of the lectionary is often as revealing as what is put in. Here is the omitted passage, starting in verse 13:

*<sup>13</sup> Then the Lord said to him, "Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there. <sup>14</sup> But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. <sup>15</sup> You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age. <sup>16</sup> In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure."*

400 years! I mean thanks for the promise God but could we maybe speed up the timeline?

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Not only this, but We know that the next parts of the story are not some fairytale dream either:

Sarah thought it preposterous that she would ever have a child, so she interpreted this promise from God as that Abraham must have a child with her slave Hagar. Abraham has his first son Ishmael. Sarah is jealous and bitter. God comes down in the form of three figures appear and tell Abraham that he will have a son with Sarah and then Sarah LAUGHS! But she does bear a son at the ripe age of 90, giving birth to Isaac, whose name means, he laughs!

The story doesn't get easier from there. Hagar and Ishmael are sent off violently and with little to no regard. Abraham is asked to sacrifice Isaac, Isaac wrestles with God...literally. And so on and so on.

So this story is far from "God said it, I believed it, then it happened." There was quite the journey full of winding roads and some dead ends along the way from God's promise to Abraham to the fulfilment of that promise, including 400 years as Abraham's people serving as slaves in Egypt. I am sure that there were days which God's promises felt far off from Abraham and his people.

I wonder if there were nights before Ishmael and Isaac were born where Abraham found himself looking up at the stars that were too vast to be counted, and if he wondered how long it would take for God's promise to be realized. He wanted an heir, a legacy, a child. And while God promised him this, it didn't happen right away. I wonder if there were moments if Abraham's hope felt flickering and distant like the stars that he saw above.

Abraham's story is one where the journey is more complicated and more arduous than first anticipated. Abraham wasn't alone, and if you have ever felt this way, you are not alone either.

### **Jesus knew a thing or two about detours in his journey.**

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If you are anything like me, then there can be a tendency to think that Jesus' journeys in his life were quiet and pleasant. Perhaps you imagine Jesus walking in a clean and crisp white robe as he strolls through the lush countryside surrounded by smiling children and blissful sheep and other wildlife that intently listen in to what Jesus has to say. Jesus speaks quietly as everyone leans in and smiles as they hang on his every word. AS IF.

One of my favorite shirts growing up was a picture of Jesus with a crown of thorns and the caption that says:

MEEK. MILD. AS IF.

Passages like ours today in Luke ought to break us out of this overly cartoonish, fairytale Jesus that spoke softly and gently and always had perfect hair.

Luke 13 finds Jesus in the middle of his journey to Jerusalem, and one that is marked by rejection, death threats and some sassy comebacks from our Lord and Savior.

In a top ten quotable lines by Jesus, you will probably not ever hear “Go and tell that fox that I am going to keep healing” and “No prophet can die outside of Jerusalem!” on the list. Here we see Jesus fully in his sassy pants and providing some choice words for the most powerful King in the region, and perhaps the world at that time.

In this short, four verse section gives us a powerful glimpse into the hard reality that Christ faced, and how he faces it.

Jesus’ witness to hope, love, and liberation constantly and consistently threatened the powerful and those who stood to benefit from having control and power. The Kingdom of Heaven that Jesus is inviting here on earth crashes into the earthly kingdoms and kings like Herod. To these king and these kingdoms, Jesus is seen as a threat.

Ironically, it is the good work that we praise and celebrate Jesus for today (healing, exorcising demons, curing the sick) are the very things that get him reject from cities and towns on his journey. In Luke 4, where we were last week, Jesus was rejected from his hometown of Nazareth because he claimed to be the fulfilled promise named in Scripture to bring healing and freedom for those who were suffering.

And it wasn’t just tyrant kings that disliked Jesus. We know that even the religious elite had a problem with this Jesus guy! I mean healing is good and all, but this guy had the audacity to heal whenever he wanted!

Shortly before this passage in Luke 13 read today, just a few verses before, Jesus was teaching in a synagogue and there was a woman who had been crippled for 18 years, and couldn’t stand. Jesus stops teaching, and heals the woman, and she immediately straightened up and praised God.

And then almost as immediately as the woman stands, the residing leader of the synagogue rebukes that action because Jesus healed on the Sabbath, a day reserved for rest and for the praising of God. Are you with me? Jesus offers rest to a woman weary and pained for almost two decades, and the healing of her body leads to the holy praising of God. Rest and praise. But it upset the status quo, and that's not how we do things around here, son. Sort of can't see the forest for the trees, right?

No doubt that there was some connection to this event and the fact that the next scene are the Pharisees whispering death threats against Jesus. Jesus' biggest critics were often the religious folks who were annoyed and challenged by his redefining what faith might look like, or by who Jesus chose to hang around.

The kings were threatened by him. The religious elites rebuked him and couldn't handle his wide lens of what a life of faith looked like, and who could do it, and when it could be done, and how it might look in the world. Jesus threatens the spiritual imagination of those for whom religion is their job.

And this journey leads to Jesus being betrayed and killed by those who were closest to him.

Not much of a bedtime story, is it?

And yet, it is a story that we need to hear. Perhaps the church ought to pay attention to where Jesus' message feels uncomfortable and threatening to us today. Who are the people that we have justified to be outside of God's reach and whom we have knowingly or unknowingly excluded others. **Where are the places where we are seeking to claim a "happily ever after" when God is actually saying "TO BE CONTINUED..."?**

We need to be threatened once again by Jesus' insistent love for all people. Jesus had love EVEN the ones that want to kill him. Even though he knew Jerusalem would be the place that would seek his life, Jesus shows love these enemies, wishing to gather them up like a mother hen. He exhibits lament and compassion on those who wish to do him harm.

Jesus constantly challenges our notions of inclusion, forgiveness, comfort and love.

These stories find us in Lent, which seems fitting. Lent is an opportunity to break us from those places where we have power or we think we have power. The Lenten call to self-denial is a journey to accept those places where we are utterly

dependent on things other than God. Those things that we seek and use to define our value and purpose in life.

We are two weeks into Lent this year, and if you gave something up or adopted a new discipline, then you know how gritty that journey of self-denial can be. It is work to be aware of where you are unknowingly dependent. It can be exhausting, and quite a journey to continue to choose humility. But there is a reason that Lent is a season, and that it is not just one day or a long weekend. We are invited to see the Lenten journey as just that, a journey.

We tend to love instant gratification. We love the idea of Easter but we want it now! And while Jesus promises that his work will be done on the third day, we remember that before resurrection, there is death.

Lent calls us back to the hard work of humility and sacrifice. We remember that Jesus calls us on a journey to abandon power, deny ourselves, and embrace sacrifice, and that there are times that we, like Abraham, can find ourselves in the midst of a promise being fulfilled, but still seems like a long way off.

We were made aware of that distance, between promise and reality, this weekend. In Revelation 21, we hear of a promise of a new heavens and a new earth, where there will be no more tears, no more death, and the lion and the lamb will lay down together.

Sounds like a fairytale ending, doesn't it? And yet, we are ripped out of this dream with the news hearing that 50 people from at least 5 different countries, one as young as 4 years old, were killed WHILE THEY WERE PRAYING in a mosque in New Zealand.

This was not a part of God's promise or plan. Senseless violence and hate driven ignorance and fear are things out of a nightmare, not a fairytale. It feels like in these places that we are stuck in the barren wasteland, a vast wilderness where we feel lost and we are surrounded by unfamiliar terrain.

In these places where we wake up in what feels like a bad dream, we must realize that our faith is not one that resolves all of our problems, where there is one grand finale, show-stopping number and then the credits roll.

The story keeps going and there is still work to be done. In Luke, Jesus kept on healing and exorcising demons in the midst of death threats, rejection and lots of

negative publicity. Jesus keeps doing the gritty, often unglamorous work of pursuing justice, seeking liberation and wholeness for all.

May Lent be for us a continuing reminder that we are called to this work as well. And we see from the headlines that there is still healing to be done and there are still demons that need to be exorcised.

**Indeed, we need healing in our hearts from the poison of hatred and ignorance, and we must work to exorcise the demons of white supremacy, xenophobia, Islamophobia and racism that have infected our moral consciousness to a point where we have blinded ourselves from seeing the image of the divine in another human being.**

Oh yes, there is still work to be done.

Lent is a reminder that our journey with God is not all “happily ever after” and fairytale tableaux. There are indeed places and times that it would be easier to overlook the hard parts of scripture and to move too quickly towards solutions that cause harm just to avoid pain and discomfort in ourselves.

**Lent is a powerful reminder to break ourselves from a fairytale version faith.**

It is a reminder of our mortality, that Jesus’ ministry journey starts in the wilderness and ends on the cross. This journey threatened the powers that be, sought healing and wholeness for all people. This story does not neatly wrap up and provide a simple moral at the end, but rather consistently challenges the notion that following Jesus only means being nice and civil all the time. Sometimes it means getting sassy and doing the hard, unromantic work that we have been called to do.

May we be the ones that wake up, and get to work.

**In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**