

Text: Genesis 15.1-12, 17-18; Psalm 27 (A – v. 5); Philippians 3.17 – 4.1; Luke 13.31-35

CHILDREN’S MESSAGE: Bring passports – talk about Paul’s claim that “our citizenship is from heaven.”

There are weeks when all the readings fit together nicely and complement one another like pieces of a puzzle that snuggle together. If you were listening closely, you noticed that this is not one of those weeks... Atleast, not at first glance.

The first story of Abram: fearful that he is landless and childless, persists asking God that we are no strangers to: *how am I to know that you will provide abundance in my life? Why should I trust you?* We usually tell and know the part of the story where God takes Abram outside and points to the stars and says, “Count them, that’s how many descendants you’ll have.”

But this strange second half of the story we often leave out... It’s the part where God asks Abram to bring a cow, a goat, and a ram. And they cut the animals in half and lay them out. And God makes a covenant – a promise – by passing through the middle of the animals cut in two as a smoking fire pot and flaming torch...

Ancient near east scholars tell us that this is how people sometimes made covenants. And the implied promise was – if you didn’t uphold your end of the promise: “The same thing that happened to the animals will have to happen to you.” This is according to the words of the song about this very story. Yes, there is a song about this story by a group called *Half-Handed Cloud* and the song’s called: “Animals Are Cut In Two.” If you ask nicely, I think Nina will play it for you sometime. But entering this biblical story world is strange indeed... I don’t know about you, but it’s not exactly the bedtime bible story that I grew up with...

The reading from Paul’s letter to the Roman military colony of Phillipi is a *little* less strange. Paul contrasts those who are “enemies of the cross of Christ” with we whose “citizenship is in heaven.” As I was thinking about this, I was considering how today we are inundated with messages like

the commercial that's been playing lately. Flags wave while a massive pick-up truck powers over rough land in slow motion as a song with the lyrics plays, "This is *our* country" in the background. The commercial concludes with a low voice saying, "This is *our* country, *This* is our truck." It seems the implied message is: *to purchase this truck is to be a citizen of this country.*

But I think Paul's message invites us to ask questions. What does it mean to claim *our citizenship in heaven* in contrast to the message of a commercial like this? How does one apply for citizenship of this heavenly country? And is Paul suggesting we should simply ignore the challenges and issues of *this* world? – escape to a heavenly country that has nothing to do with the one in which we live?

Surely, we would think that Jesus would offer us some words that are less strange than the other two readings. One friend joked about the Gospel reading for today that it is about "Foxes and Prophets and Hens, Oh My!" The sharp contrast that Jesus draws between Herod the Fox and Jesus' desire to draw the chicks under Jesus' mother hen wings could hardly be more poignant. You don't have to hang around the barnyard very long to learn what foxes do to chicks or the mother hens that guard them.

And maybe this is the first similarity we have between this strange combination of texts. The first place to fit together the jigsaw puzzle pieces of bible stories as we discern an over-arching biblical theme. Jesus claims his job – his role as a prophet – is to stand between the foxes of this world and the brood... And it's a little like the God who promises Abram an abundant life. A promise made by God putting God's self in a vulnerable position between two halves of animals. And remember if you don't deliver on your promise: "The same thing that happened to the animals will have to happen to you."

Reading the bible is at times a bit like putting a jigsaw puzzle together. If you get too fixated on any one of the pieces, you forget the larger picture. Still you have to study the individual pieces to see where they fit. Certainly there's a couple of puzzle pieces of the bible that seem to divide the world between *Christians* and *Non-Christians* and turns Christianity into some *other-worldly* religion. Texts like the one from Philippians for today where Paul makes a strong contrast between the "enemies of the cross of Christ" and we whose "citizenship is in heaven."

It's that *us-against-them* mentality that we as humans are so accustomed to. *If you're not with us, your against us*, we hear from the current administration. It's quite a clean cut – *us* and *them*. And it's a little like cutting animals in two. Seems like a simple job, but anyone who has butchered animals knows, cutting an animal in two isn't so easy. There's a lot of muscle and bones connecting it all together that you have to deal with. And you certainly can't do it without getting your hands and probably your clothes bloody.

There are pieces of the bible that can and have been used like a sharp knife to divide, to separate... *us* and *them*... the *chosen few* and the *rest*... the *poor* and the *wealthy*... It is so easy to carve up the bible into pieces and then use those pieces to carve up our world. But Christianity isn't just some *other-worldly, us-against-them* religion. When you put all the pieces together, it has a lot to do with *this world*. It has a lot to do with seeing ourselves as connected to all people, all lands, all animals – connected to them like one piece in a jigsaw puzzle.

It's so easy to get lost in the tiny puzzle pieces of the bible. But I think the bible has a larger, yet sometimes illusive picture to it. The God of Abram (The Promise-Maker) who stands in a place of vulnerability. And Jesus (The Prophet-Hen) who desires only to gather the brood under her wings. Promises of abundance. Promises of protection. Promises of finding a way when there seems to be no way. Promises of *hope*.

This biblical world is indeed a strange one. And those who want to become citizens of this world are perhaps stranger still. They speak of loving their enemies. They say that there's "enough for all." They talk about following the way of the cross, rather than seeking power and glory.

...so as one of us this morning gets a passport through the baptismal waters...let's get our passports renewed and let's plunge into this strange biblical world. Let's claim our citizenship from those baptismal waters – the waters where *we were first claimed as citizens of God's country, as members of God's family*. Not so we could cut lines in the sand between us and them... But so we could know and trust and put *our hope in* this God who stands in vulnerability on lines and walls and in between divisions...

This God who gathers both sides to Godself like a hen gathers her brood under her wings. This God who we have revealed to us piece by puzzle piece through the bible. This God who gathers us into one loaf of bread from which we are fed and nourished. Amen.

SERMON THEMES:

- Covenant – cutting animals in half... God passes through them and puts Godself 'on the line' – becomes vulnerable... Jesus passes between the foxes and the little chicks – gathers the hens and puts down his life to the fox...
- Jerusalem – the city with a spiritual landscape like New York City's geographical landscape... Big city vs. Small town
- Why, then, do the chicks strive so hard to escape that place? Why must Jesus say, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" Why would they not? Why do we not? We are as much a mystery to ourselves as Jerusalem must have been to herself! Why is our trust in our Lord's care for us so shallow? Why do we wander off into our own paths so readily, as though we can live life on our own terms . . . even if and when the fox shows up? At no place in life, perhaps, does our sin show up quite so boldly as the way we run from the shelter of God's wings in order to live in the shadow of the fox! Our self-will, our falsely placed self-confidence betrays us all too frequently as we listen to the soft "purring" of the fox, turning to the world around us for our security, our contentment, our source of comfort and consolation. (www.online-sermons.info/)
- *Life Signs* by Henri Nouwen (fecundity vs. productivity) – for NEXT WEEKS readings not this one...

FIRST READING

Genesis 15:1–12, 17–18

God promises a childless and doubting Abram that he will have a son, that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars, and that the land will be their inheritance. Abram's trust in God's promise, sealed with a covenant-making ritual, is reckoned to him as
righteousness.

After 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,

PSALM (ELW)

Psalm 27

In the day of trouble, God will give me shelter. (Ps. 27:5)

¹The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

²**When evildoers close in against me to devour my flesh,
they, my foes and my enemies, will stumble and fall.**

³Though an army encamp against me, my heart will not fear.

Though war rise up against me, my trust will not be shaken.

⁴**One thing I ask of the LORD; one thing I seek;
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life;
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek God in the temple. R**

⁵For in the day of trouble God will give me shelter,

hide me in the hidden places of the sanctuary, and raise me high up on a rock.

⁶**Even now my head is lifted up above my enemies who surround me.**

**Therefore I will offer sacrifice in the sanctuary, sacrifices of rejoicing;
I will sing and make music to the LORD.**

⁷Hear my voice, O LORD, when I call;

have mercy on me and answer me.

⁸**My heart speaks your message-- "Seek my face."**

Your face, O LORD, I will seek. R

⁹Hide not your face from me, turn not away from your servant in anger.

Cast me not away--you have been my helper; forsake me not, O God of my salvation.

¹⁰**Though my father and my mother forsake me,
the LORD will take me in.**

¹¹Teach me your way, O LORD;

lead me on a level path, because of my oppressors.

¹²**Subject me not to the will of my foes,**

for they rise up against me, false witnesses breathing violence.

¹³This I believe--that I will see the goodness of the LORD

in the land¹ of the living!
14 Wait for the LORD¹ and be strong.
Take heart and wait¹ for the LORD! R

SECOND READING

Philippians 3:17—4:1

Although Paul's devotion to Christ has caused him to be persecuted, he does not regret the course he has taken. Writing from prison, he expresses confidence in a glorious future and encourages other Christians to follow in his footsteps.

Chapter 3

¹⁷Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. ¹⁹Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. ²⁰But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. ²¹He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

Chapter 4

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

GOSPEL

Luke 13:31–35

Jesus likens the tyrant Herod to a murderous fox. He speaks of himself as a mother hen who would sacrifice her own life to shield her children from danger.

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.'"