

Second Sunday in Lent — March 17, 2019
Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Luke 13:31-35

Spring is in the air, finally, thanks be to God! As a cyclist, that means I will soon be traveling again down county roads enjoying the fresh air and signs of new life emerging in the countryside. If you have spent anytime near the ditches of Central Iowa, you know that they teem with a robust population of redwing blackbirds. You may also know that these small birds are very aggressive in defending their young from apparent predators, like say, a guy zooming by on a bike. “Chirp! Chirp! Chirp!” the alarm goes up. Then I see the shadow of a bird getting larger as it approaches my shadow on the road, and I know it’s time to duck. Occasionally I hear the click of claws touching down on the top of my helmet.

I probably shouldn’t admit that these experiences usually elicit PG-13 language from me, even as I am impressed by the willingness of such small creatures to confront a much larger, strange-looking animal in defense of their young. That amazingly strong bond between parent and child runs across species, that willingness even to risk your own life to protect your child from harm.

In today’s reading from Genesis, we are assured that God has precisely that attitude toward God’s children, that God is willing to put God’s life on the line for us. It is not immediately obvious, but it’s there in the bizarre covenant ceremony that comes at the end of the episode.

The story is about a low point in the faith of Abraham and Sarah. God had promised to make of them a great nation—to bless this old, seemingly infertile couple, with children and a multitude of descendants, and to give them a land to live in. In an ancient, agrarian society, if you didn’t have land and children to work the land, you didn’t have a future. The essence of God’s promise to Abraham and Sarah is the promise of a future, a future of abundant life for which their present circumstances would not encourage them to hope.

It has been some time since God had come to Abraham and Sarah with this promise. They had trusted it. They had stepped out in faith, continuing on their journey not knowing how it would all work out. But still no child, so Abram questions God: “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless . . . You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” God renews the covenant with an extravagant image. “Look toward the heavens and count the stars, if you are able to count them,” God said to Abram. “So shall your descendants be.” And we hear then that “Abraham believed the LORD.” He and Sarah are willing to journey on, trusting in God’s promise.

And yet that seems to not stop Abraham from continuing to express his doubts to God. “O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess the promised land?” And that’s when we get this bizarre (bizarre to us) covenant ceremony with various animals being sawed in half. This was a common covenant ritual in the ancient Near East. When you made a promise, a covenant with someone, you cut an animal in half as if to say, “If I back out on my end of the deal, may the

same happen to me.” In other words, you are backing up your promise with your life. The symbolism to Abraham and Sarah would have been obvious: God is serious enough about this promise to back it up with God’s own life. God is willing to give God’s own life so that we, God’s children, may have a future.

It should come as no surprise when God’s promise comes in the flesh, in the shape of Jesus, that we should hear him promise to put his life on the line for us, like a mother hen spreading her wings to protect her brood. At first this image of God may strike us as a bit unusual—the God of the universe compared to a barnyard animal—but it is not uncommon in the scriptures.

When God’s people cry out in fear, despair, and doubt the psalms often respond with this very image: “Hide me under the shelter of your wings,” cries the psalmist in Psalm 17. “God’s wings will cover you, and you will find refuge beneath them,” Psalm 91 assures us. “For in the days of trouble God will give me shelter . . . and raise me high upon a rock,” from today’s Psalm 27. Though the bird image is not directly employed, high upon a rock or in a tree is where birds make their nests. When Jesus compares himself to a mother hen, he is invoking a common image from the scriptures, the feminine image of a mothering God who comforts, shelters, protects, and defends her children from all danger and harm, even at the risk of her own life.¹

Nothing will come between the mother hen and her children. She spreads her wings defiantly in the face of the predator fox, as if to say, “The only to them is through me.” Think about what that says. The only way our predators can get to us is through Jesus, who puts his body between us and all that would harm us—Jesus who has already faced the enemy (the predator) on our behalf, who died and was raised, over whom death has no power—this is the one who stands with outstretched arms between us and all that would rob us of life and hope. Jesus on the cross is God in the flesh, backing up the promise of a future for the whole creation with God’s own life. Nothing will come between us and God’s promise. Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

There is a prayer in the Book of Common Prayer of the Episcopal Church that beautifully captures this image. It begins:

Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross
that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace

There is Jesus, God incarnate, arms outstretched on the cross, sheltering us from the power of sin, death, and evil and welcoming all into God’s loving embrace. But then listen where the prayer goes next as it continues:

¹ "Sundays & Seasons."

<https://members.sundaysandseasons.com/Preaching/Index/2019-3-17/1984#sermon>. Accessed 15 Mar. 2019.

So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your Name.²

As God's hands are stretched out eternally in welcoming love for all, we pray that we will reach forth our hands in loving welcome, so that all people may be gathered into God's sheltering embrace.

During this season of Lent we confess that we are often lured by those wily foxes who, playing to our fears, tempt us to restrict our love to ourselves and our own, a narrow love so often manifested in jealousy, apathy, fear, racism, prejudice, and exclusion—a love so narrow in comparison to the outstretched arms of Christ. As we shelter in the shadow of the holy wings, may we find courage to stretch our arms in an ever widening embrace, journeying on in faith toward the abundant life that God has promised for all of God's children.

² "The Online Book of Common Prayer." <https://www.bcponline.org/>, p. 101. Accessed 15 Mar. 2019.