

LENT II

(Abram) 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. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. Genesis 15:14

“Jerusalem, 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! See, your house is left to you.” Luke 13: 33-34

Today our Hebrew Scripture reading and Gospel bring us, I believe, to the heart of the mystery. The heart of the mystery of the origins of our faith, and the heart of the history that has been the blessing and curse of our Jewish- Christian heritage.

I remember when, in my Old Testament course at seminary, we came to this section of Genesis about the covenant God “cut” with Abram. Everything ground to a halt. O.T. 101 was already the most difficult and confusing of courses: the textbook was constantly mystifying, veering back and forth between what was actually happening in the ancient Middle East, let’s say 6000 years ago – and much of what was happening is not well understood, even now – and what Hebrew Scripture *said* was happening. Also, the text used unfamiliar words and concepts and never defined them. The two- hour lectures, twice a week, helped to guide us through this vast morass of history and myth, the multiple strands of authorship, the variety of genres.

But still, when we got to this covenant section, the professors more or less threw up their hands. *We just don’t know*, they said.

The basic set-up is this: God makes a promise to Abram, still childless in his advanced years, that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars, and that the land will belong to them. Abram, never shy, demands a sign. And God’s answer to this involves a rite, for which Abram must prepare. Here’s what one of my commentaries says,

God, rather than the human being, goes through the rite. ... In the only biblical parallel, in Jeremiah, participants walked between divided animals and thereby invoked death upon themselves should they be unfaithful to the terms of the covenant. But here,

God does that. *We do not know why the birds were the only animals not divided, why the animals had to be three years old...*

Abram falls into a deep sleep, with all dark and foreboding. Darkness appears integral to the rite, perhaps to shroud what God does. Such darkness symbolizes dreamlike seeing and knowing, which penetrates to the deepest recesses in Abram's being... God's personal involvement constitutes the unusual character of the rite. In an act of self-imprecation, God in effect puts the divine life on the line, "writing " the promise in blood. ...

God commits to the promise at such a depth that God considers an experience of suffering and even death. This reveals the depth of the divine faithfulness to Abram and the divine willingness to become vulnerable for the sake of the promise. (The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol 1. pp 447-449)

It doesn't get more profound, more mysterious, more binding, than this. And if we are to take the story and its meaning with serious faithfulness, we must understand that this promise and covenant God makes with Abram is made with us, because we are Abram's descendents. Such is the depth of God's commitment to us, God's own faithfulness, God's willingness to be vulnerable.

And then our Gospel, in which Jesus laments the fate of Jerusalem and foreshadows his own fate. Jerusalem is the inheritance of the descendants of Abraham.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it. Here we are reminded of the implication of God's putting God's blood and God's divine life on the line: that's what God's doing, in the person of Jesus. And that life will be taken, this prophet will be killed.

Jesus laments the fate of Jerusalem, 2000 years ago. What lament would he utter now, to see the cruel and holy city divided by war and religion, its holy sites quarreled over by three faiths?

The mystery of human sin and intransigence. The mystery of God's vulnerability, God's continued faithfulness despite our human sin and intransigence, our eternal forgetful faithlessness.

It doesn't get more profound, more mysterious, more binding, than this.

Now, perhaps it seems unhelpful to dwell here on blood promises and sacrifices, and unfathomable ancient weirdness, on darkness and sorrow and intractable conflict. Isn't my job to demystify Scripture and make it more user-friendly?

Well, in general I would say that's true. But what's also true is that our faith tradition is rooted in antiquity, in a history and culture and people we can see only through a glass darkly. And that's not a bad thing, necessarily. Think of our own personal ancestries, our grandparents and great grandparents, even our own parents, indeed. How much do we know about their lives, their motivations, their thinking?

Today is the first anniversary of my mother's death, so I'm particularly mindful of these questions. And I've been doing a bit of genealogical research as part of a project I'm working on about my grandmother. So I've been reading about my ancestors, going back to the sixteen hundreds in some cases, and I'm struck both by how little I can know about them, and about how much certain themes and struggles and qualities of character echo down the centuries.

But I'm also aware of how much I must invent, not just about these seventeenth century folks, but about my own parents, whose histories before I was old enough to be attentive—and how attentive are we to our parents' histories at any age?—whose histories are known to me only in outline, and whose inner lives are almost entirely unrevealed.

So, the bible is, among other things, the story of our family of faith, with all its impenetrable secrets, its shameful and gory skeletons, its proud and unexpected and sometimes inexplicable triumphs. Above all, it's the story of relationships: relationships among the Israelites themselves and with their oppressors and their enemies, relationships between prophets and people, rulers and subjects, relationships between Jesus and the disciples, among the disciples themselves, between Jesus and his enemies, Jesus and his followers. The relationship between Jesus and God. And, transcending all, and enduring all, the relationship between God and us, the unbreakable bond, the unfathomable faithfulness. The covenant.

And I would say one more thing. We are all, in the end, creatures of mystery. In this, we do not differ from our ancestors, ancestors in fact or in faith. Why are we here? Why do we keep coming back? To church? To God? We all have explanations: we're here for the kids, we're here because we feel guilty if we don't come, we're here for the community, we're here to help others, we're here to pursue justice. All these reasons are real enough. But they don't explain everything. At the heart of our faithfulness is mystery.

And that, my dear friends, is just fine. Mystery is what makes us human. Mystery is what makes us God's children, God's beloved, in whom God is well pleased.

Amen.

