

2 Lent C - 28 February 2010
Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13: 31-35
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Our world is rapidly changing. At its best it can be a chaotic place. Sometimes it can even prove to be dangerous. People need only drive down Highway 183 south and see the burned shell of a building. This building and its occupants fell victim to nothing less than chaos when a distraught individual sent his small aircraft careening into its side. People once again are reminded of the chaos of September 11th 2001. Old fears and lingering prejudices emerge.

In such a world, many people find it hard to step out of their comfort zone. Such is the subject of this year's Lenten Series, *Taking a Break From the Comfortable and Familiar*. People naturally gravitate toward the familiar. It's just what people do. Familiar faces and places are sources of comfort. Being creatures of habit, people like to hold onto to what they know, or at least to what they *think* they know. So, what they don't know, they fear. Stepping out from one's comfort is a struggle.

It seems like only yesterday that my husband Tim, our friends, and I began loading a moving van with all of our worldly possessions. Together, Tim and I were answering God's call. It is a call that includes a new and unfamiliar life here in Austin, Texas, a strange land in its own right. Or I should say, 'weird.' Longhorns reign supreme here. People make a strange sign with their hands as they yell "Hook 'em horns." A steer named Bevo looks on from the sidelines.

This call that we are following includes life at the Seminary of the Southwest. It brings us here to ECR, where you have embraced us as members of this warm and welcoming community. This call is leading me to a life of service and ministry to God's people somewhere, with a people new to us, where once again we will encounter the unfamiliar.

As I look back on all this packing and this time of preparation, on the excitement and the fears of this new adventure, here I stand, finding myself identifying very much with the Old Testament figure of Abraham. Like me, I notice, Abraham packs up all of his worldly possessions. Like me,

he does not know what lies ahead. What he does know is that God is calling him to something unfamiliar. And like me, Abraham responds to the call. Abraham steps out from his comfort.

In the Reading for this morning, Abraham is getting nervous. His tolerance for discomfort, for the unfamiliar, has been pushed to its limits. Abraham contemplates a quintessential question. A question that many people may ask themselves from time to time. Abraham wonders, what has this all been for? Standing in the dark night of the desert, stars shimmering overhead, Abraham and God speak together. They speak not as creator and creature, but as two old and dear friends.

"Lord," says Abraham, "I pack up my tent." "I leave behind a familiar and friendly land." "I drag my beautiful wife Sarah, my nephew Lot, our servants and our livestock from the land of my fathers, to this place. And now, here we sit." "You promise to make me the father of many nations, with descendents as numerous as the sand, as numerous as these stars above." "So, why now," asks Abraham, "does it seem that the heir of everything I own is going to be my nephew instead of my own offspring?" "Where is the heir you said I would have?" Abraham wonders. "What's the point of all this wandering off into strange places and uncomfortable ways?" "God," calls Abraham, "are you there?" "Are you listening?" "I need something more to hang on to."

God might have simply responded plainly to Abraham assuring him that he really is responding to a call that comes from God. But instead, God asks Abraham for a sacrifice, a bird split in two. Maybe Abraham was accustomed to such things, who knows? But then as Abraham is falling asleep, a mysterious smoking pot and flaming torch somehow float between the pieces of the bird. This is unusual, to say the least. Many scholars interpret this as a kind of ceremony to represent the covenant that exists between two parties. But the main thing is, this is far beyond the familiar and comfortable. With all due reverence, God is keeping it weird.

I remember when moving day finally arrived. We pulled out the driveway and I think, the convoy of two cars and a truck must have looked a lot like Abraham's caravan. The two dogs sitting in the front seat of my vehicle weigh so much that the passenger side fasten seat belt sign turns on. Our two-year old cockatiel Da Vinci rides caged in my backseat. Maybe we look a little like Noah's ark, too. The main thing is, we are heading away from all we've known and loved. Leaving the familiar behind us, we journey into the unknown..

In similar fashion, Jesus is on his own journey. Today's Reading from the Gospel describes Jesus continuing his ministry of teaching and healing. But what we know, especially in this season, is that Jesus is making his way slowly but surely away from home, away from friends and family, away, and into an unknown whose hostility few if any can even imagine.

Riding along in our caravan, we're on interstate 10 when I glance back in my rear view mirror. And that's when I see this beautiful yellow bird, grasping his cage bars and holding on for dear life. I think my bird is freaking out! I'm terrified. But probably not as much as he is. There's nothing I can do to calm his fears. This is how he rides for the entire trip.

On his journey, Jesus meets a group of Pharisees. They warn Jesus that Herod is out to kill him. Maybe they mean well; maybe they just want to discourage Jesus. In any case, Jesus replies that they should tell that "fox" Herod that he is teaching, healing, and casting out demons. Jesus is doing everything he has been sent and called to do. "Tell Herod," says Jesus, "and tell anyone else who cares to hear: I am following my call. What they want to do about it is up to them. But wherever it takes me, I am following my call."

Finally we arrive in Austin and settle in safely. Poor bird Da Vinci has gone through such a hard time. We decide to get him a friend. A young female cockatiel, Elizabeth comes to live with us. Maybe you can guess what happens next. Elizabeth and Da Vinci will soon become parents.

Throughout Israel's history: time and again, God has tried to gather in the people, wanting to shelter and protect them. And time and again, the

people refuse. No doubt Jesus knows of Jerusalem's long history for persecuting prophets. Jesus knows that the religious authorities of Israel have led God's people astray. They have muffled God's call. They have so focused the people on their fear of the law that they have led them to forget the law's intent. They have forgotten love of God and love of neighbor. They not only live under Roman oppression, but suffer moral oppression and spiritual captivity at the hands of their own religious leaders.

Nevertheless, Jesus loves them. Jesus longs for them, aches for them, begs them, to step out from their comfort zone and stand freely and free, in the law and the light of God's Love. Jesus sees beyond the chaos of the people. Jesus loves them, even if they do not love him back. If the people have given up on God or on themselves, Jesus has not given up on them. Jesus does not give up on us. God calls Jesus to gather together the people whom he loves, and wherever that takes him, even if to the unfamiliar, to the uncomfortable, to hostile rejection, to painful grief, yet Jesus is answering the call of God.

As the baby birds hatch, we peek into the nesting box. And when we do, we see the ugliest little birds anyone could imagine staring right back. All mouth, eyes and belly. I watch for days as the parents nurture their babies. When we get too close, the momma and papa bird hiss fiercely. And the babies just rock back and forth, side to side, seeming to know that they are secure. Under the shelter of their parents' wings, the baby birds thrive.

During this Lenten season God is calling people, calling you and me, to examine our response to the longing God has still to enfold us all in Love. It is a call to each of us to step out of our comfort zones, to reach out, however afraid or tenuously, to embrace circumstances with which we are unfamiliar. To reach out to people with whom we find ourselves uncomfortable. This is a call, an opportunity for us to offer God's comfort and shelter to others. Even as we face the chaos of uncertain times. We can reach out in God's name. Together we can experience a love so holy that it causes God still to weep for those who have yet to welcome it.

Amen.