

## **Nothing is Impossible for God (once we get out of the way)**

Second Sunday in Lent, March 13, 2022

by Intern Pastor Jory Mickelson

Good morning. GOOD MORNING! I hope that you have had a good week. I have been praying for each of you this week, that despite the news cycle, despite the uncertainty about the future, and despite the difficulties that each of you are facing in your own lives, that you feel God's presence. I've been praying that when things seem hard, immovable, or that if you feel exhausted by nearly everything, that you feel the love, warmth, and care of the Holy One. That has been my prayer for you.

There is so much uncertainty in the world. There is so much change. Most of us would rather turn off the news, throw the newspaper into bin, and forget that so much is happening beyond Whatcom County. Maybe even forget so much is happening beyond our own front doors. We can be easily given over to fear. I can easily be pushed into worry, depression, and fear when I look too closely, or too often at all of the bad news. Look at all of the broken relationships. At what seems like an impossible situation in which I am helpless. That is our world.

This is the world too, that Abraham found himself in. God had promised Abraham four big things: a great land, a great nation of descendants, a name of great renowned, and a great blessing that would extend from him to all peoples of the earth. Big promises from a big God! Seemingly impossible claims, but Abraham trusted. Abraham risked it all and took the first few steps. Then Abraham, like most of us, like me and like you, thought, "What am I getting myself into?" Possibly, "What was I thinking?" Probably, "Crap!"

Where did Abraham end up? An old man in the desert with his elderly wife. No children. No land in sight. No great name. Abraham was lost and God seemed far off. Maybe even absent. So, Abraham did what we all do in these circumstances, he decided to take charge. God's plans weren't happening and so Abraham decides to make some contingency plans. After all, doesn't the Holy One help those who help themselves?

Abraham's wife is barren, so he sleeps with his servant who bears a child. Fixed! Abraham thinks. Problem solved! he says. Not really, because this causes some domestic issues, as you can imagine.

No one but Abraham is really happy with the results. Abraham starts to deal with the "situation" his good idea has created, and it turns into self-pity. He is ready to blame it on God for not holding up their end of the bargain. And this is where our Old Testament reading opens this morning. "God!" Abraham says, "you blew it! Look at the mess I am in!" The Loving One replies that they will indeed fulfill all of the promises they made. Then God renews/or makes a new covenant with Abraham.

This story feels familiar to me. Maybe even a little too close to home. I ask God for something, I think I've made it pretty clear to God what it should look like, and then nothing happens. So, being the intelligent and capable human being I am, I take the actions that God was supposed to take care of. Sometimes people get mad at me. Sometimes things go really sideways. I then pray, "God help me!" followed by, "Where were you anyway?" There isn't too much difference between a cry for help and blame when I am up to my neck in it.

Psalms 27 echoes these sentiments. Now some scriptural commentaries call this a "triumphant song of confidence", but I don't read it like that. Just look at the words of verses 9 and 10, "Hide 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. Though my father and my mother forsake me. . . ." That sounds more like, a song hoping God is listening when we are in crisis rather than triumphant confidence to me. Maybe even a lament. A lament also means a passionate expression of grief or sorrow. A lament is a prayer to hold God to God's promises. Even mourning the loss or death of someone. There is a lot of lamenting prayers happening in the world right now. And they are real prayers—biblical prayers. The Bible is filled with them. Our world is filled with them. Often our hearts are filled with lamentations.

How often in our prayer life, when our lives are heating up, do we say, "God things are bad, where are you?" When there seems too much to handle, do we come to God with a list? With this attitude,

we sometimes feel God is too big or too slow to remember everything. It is our job to remind God what they are supposed to be doing. In this way, God always seems to be running behind. Late to the party. Always missing the big appointments. Okay God, we think, you've had

your chance, I guess it's up to me now. This is what Abraham thought. This is often what the psalmists think. I find myself here all the time, and maybe you do as well.

I ask God for some very specific things, and then God sends me something I would rather not have. Sort of like the nation of Israel lamenting in Egypt. God heard their cries and sent them Moses. What they wanted was straw to build bricks and better food. What they got was someone showing up and saying, "Pack your bags, we are leaving the country now." The Israelites were sure of what they needed, Abraham was sure of what he needed, but God had something else in mind. Poor dumb God got it wrong again, everyone in the Bible says. God, yet again, is not getting with the program, as my grandmother used to say. "Get with the program God!" Even God would fear my grandmother's stern voice. He definitely listened to her prayers.

But what is really happening is that God was far ahead of Abraham. Far ahead of the Israelites. Far ahead of all of your worries and my tough situations. God had already gone ahead of us and was giving us what we would need. What we would need weeks, and months, and maybe even years ahead. So far beyond what we could see. So much bigger than what we could comprehend and know.

Any real contact with the Loving One leads to transformation—leads to a changing of our minds and hearts. As Richard Rohr says, "and by transformation, I mean practical!" The Israelites wanted better conditions and God said, I am going to give you a whole new life. It wasn't what they asked for, but it was exactly what they most needed. How often are we ready to settle for less than the love, compassion, and forgiveness that God has in store for us, because we would rather just change a little tiny bit instead? How often do you or I turn away from the transformation of our lives—our thoughts and our feelings, our attitudes and our actions—that are waiting for us just ahead, just around the curve in the path that we can't see coming. For us today, the enemy of the cross that Paul talks about in Philippians today isn't some demon or devil. The enemy of the cross isn't some authority figure or organization ready to persecute Christians. It isn't even someone we know who dismisses us and our faith because they don't believe. The enemy of the cross isn't

someone making fun of Christians on tv or on the radio or Facebook. When it comes down to it, most often in our lives, the enemy of the cross is no one else but ourselves.

Paul says in verse 19, "...their god is the belly...their minds are set on earthly things.... This is the old creation in us that is drowned in our baptism. This is you and I when we give up on God doing the work and begin to do it all ourselves. Any time we say, "Well God didn't show up, so I guess it's up to me." Paul continues, reminding us in verse 20, "But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." A savior. A way through that we cannot see. A transformation beyond what we can presently expect or anticipate.

This is why Jesus in gospel today ignores the warning of the Pharisees about Herod. This is why Jesus is unworried about Herod's plot to kill him. Because Jesus can see ahead. Because Jesus already knows how his story will end. But you and I? We are not God. We cannot know yet, what is to come.

Many months ago, I preached that Jesus is always about his father's work. And what is that work? Bringing new life, even in places of death. In places of agony. In places of irretrievable loss. Jesus entered the hopeless situation of Martha and Mary's grief and the death of Lazarus and brought his friend back from the dead. Jesus entered into being abandoned by his friends and family, going to trial, being tortured and executed in shame. Jesus entered the cold and hopeless tomb. But that was not the end of the story. In fact, that was the turning point. What seemed like the end. What seemed like despair. This. This was the very point in which all things were made new.

Friends, I worry as much as you do. You and I weep, sometimes alone in the dark and sometimes together. We face hard choices. We confront

seemingly impossible situations. And for us, they are. But not for God. Our God has not abandoned us. Our God will not leave us in the grave. On the most hopeless day, when Jesus' disciples went to check on his dead body in the tomb, he was not there. Instead, an angel in the tomb said, "He is not here, he is going ahead of you. . ."

Friends, God is always going ahead of us, to where we cannot see.  
Always answering our prayers weeks, months, years ahead of us.  
Bigger than we could ever hope or plan for ourselves.

The Loving One continues to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. God is always answering us out of Love, Compassion, and Mercy rather than out of our own fear and worry. God is always ready to lead us into new life, to transform our very lives, every time we are finally ready to say, "I can't God, but maybe you can. I think I will let you."