

Sermon Lent 2 C 2022

Back in the summer of 2007 I prepared to start my ministry here. Mike and I packed up our home in Minneapolis and I was looking forward to a new life here and seeing how the ministries I could offer would fit here. It was exciting. You wanted outreach and I had previously lived in the area for 15 years and had outreach connections. You wanted adult programs and I loved teaching and facilitating those. You wanted ministry for the kids, and I loved kids. My second day of work here included a vestry meeting and so I could discuss the new ministries I intended to offer. I remember looks of pleasure on several faces around the table (yes, we met in person before covid!)

In our first reading today Abram (God had not yet changed his name to the familiar Abraham) was told by God that he was going to be a patriarch. He was to have more descendants than there were stars in the sky. But Abram was afraid to believe because he had no children, not even one. How could he father a great nation without a single son? But God led him through a special sacrifice. God told him how to make the required burnt offering and then put him to sleep with an awareness that his world went completely dark in a terrifying way. He was scared. From the beginning of this encounter with God he was afraid. God was speaking directly to him and that was scary. But he had faith that God was with him, and God would bring to pass all God had proclaimed to him. It must have taken a lot of courage to have that faith because he had been told to leave home and to start life anew in Canaan and would be a patriarch. At that time, he and his wife were childless, but he trusted God's promise. Yet 25 years later (maybe biblical years are not the same as how we count time) he was still childless. When would he and his wife have the promised family or least one son? He believed this promise of God. Does this speak to you? Have you found it hard sometimes to believe God's promises to you? Of course, Abram listened to the words of God and spoke with God and obeyed God. Is that true for you too?

Someone else who listened to the word of God was a rich woman named Lydia. She lived in the Greek city of Philippi and was there when the Apostle Paul and his team first visited that city. Paul had received a call to go to Macedonia, the area of Northern Greece that included Philippi. It was his first visit to the area. It seems he looked for a synagogue to visit and thus meet some Jews resident in the city, but he found none. So, on the Sabbath day he went out of the city to the river, a seemingly nice place to worship God. A group of women had gathered there. Paul took the opportunity to preach to them, to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They seemed keen to listen, we are told. One of these women was a wealthy lady named Lydia who was converted to Christ and she invited Paul and his team to stay in her home. A new experience for her; an event that changed her life. Paul later wrote a letter with many words of encouragement to the Philippian church that had thus formed. You heard a part of his letter today. Paul urged them to live holy lives, standing firm in their faith in Jesus Christ. Having faith, standing firm in your faith is what all Christians are called to do. Have you found that to be challenging in your life experience? Maybe there was a time when you lost your faith. If so, what enabled you to regain it? Was it what someone said? Was it what he or she did? Was it the way Christians you know were living? Was it in fact God speaking to you? Maybe your faith lay dormant at times and needed resurrecting. What enabled that to happen? Could you articulate those experiences? It seems the initial experience of conversion is very uplifting. It is living the Christian life, following the commandments of Jesus to love God with all your being and to love your neighbor as you love yourself that are difficult.

Jesus used a new example of living in the Gospel message you heard today. You may have been surprised to hear that some Pharisees, those men who always seemed to oppose everything he said and did and whom he labeled as hypocrites, showed they supported him. Very strange – right? It seems they knew that just as King Herod, their Jewish king had ordered John the Baptist to be killed Jesus was also in danger. If Herod had thought Jesus' ministry threatened him in any way, Herod could order him to be arrested and punished. But Jesus was not afraid of King Herod. He called him a fox, a predator. To us foxes are usually depicted as sly and cunning. The religious leaders and Jesus would have known Herod could have ordered Jesus to be killed if Herod felt Jesus threatened his position. But Jesus did not cow-tow to Herod. Jesus was unafraid. Despite Jesus calling Herod a wily fox Jesus did not run away. Jesus depicted himself as a hen. Just as a hen could be fierce, protective of her chicks Jesus would protect himself and his message against any threats Herod planned to make. Jesus intentionally used the language of a predator and its prey. He knew his life was in danger from Herod and the religious authorities, but he was going to stand up to them and not flinch. Just as a mother hen loved and protected her chicks, so Jesus was going to protect his Gospel. He knew that Jerusalem was the place of his final destiny in his earthly life, the place where he would be killed. The foxes would get their prey. But it was the place where the people would say upon his entry into Jerusalem, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."

Jesus understood he had to go the way God wanted him to go, just as Abram did and St Paul did. Do you feel you are going the way God wants you to go? Are you living as Jesus commanded you to live? You have just come through two years of living under the threat of the covid virus and the delta and omicron variants. You have survived, of course, wherever you are right now. I hope you have survived well. Today and the days ahead I invite you to think about this new life you are living as the threat of covid seems less menacing now and I invite you to articulate what you feel you have lost. You might include: spending time with your family and friends, maybe going out to restaurants or other venues, shopping in person, taking a vacation, experiencing long periods when you did not come to church in person. You might have other things to add to your list. Your kids were not in school for a long time and your ability to work was affected. You might have needed someone to fix something in your home and no one was available, maybe a loved one died, and you could not have a big funeral, you planned a wedding or a family celebration, but it did not happen. Covid has brought many challenges.

But then think of positive changes which covid has brought about. Now you can be home and participate in meetings or at programs and be at worship using zoom or other remote means. When the weather has been bad you have still been able to attend them. You have not needed to drive to meetings, and many of you have been able to work from home, (as long as the internet stayed on!) You might have even seen your doctor remotely. Wearing a mask has enabled you to feel safe enough to go out and about. You have learned to use technology in ways you never expected to use. You might have connected with your family members more often with technology than before covid. You may have spent more time walking if your gym closed down, and walking is a great and safe way of exercising. You might have spent more time praying, a very positive thing to do.

Yes, life has changed because of the covid virus, and you have had to adapt. You have had to adapt just as Abram and St. Paul adapted their ways of living when God called them to do so. Jesus had to adapt in that he went to places where he was needed, but he did not flinch from being where he knew God wanted him to be. You are needed to go where God has called you to go, to do what God is calling you to do and to be the person God has created you to be. It may call for you to make changes in

your life, but you know that God will be with you. God was with Abram and yes, he and his wife eventually had Isaac their son. St Paul accepted the hospitality Lydia offered and had a wonderful ministry in Philippi, as his letter to them indicated. God will be with you too, with you in your ministry, meaning with you in the way you live your life for God. I close with Jesus words at the end of St Matthew's Gospel. They are, "Remember, I am with you always, until the end of the age."

Amen.