

Chicken

Lent II, Year C

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18, Psalm 27, Philippians 3:17-4:1, Luke 13:31-35

St. David's Episcopal Church, Bean Blossom, Indiana

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Genesis 15:1-12,17-18

The word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." But the word of the LORD came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir." He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." And he believed the LORD; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Then he said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess." But he said, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." He 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. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates."

Luke 13:31-35

Some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' 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. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"



This is a picture I took on my trip to Palestine a couple years ago. It is from a little church on the side of the Mount of Olives called the "Domine Fleuit," or "The Lord Wept." It commemorates the spot where Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem. The architect was apparently very literal-minded, because the church itself is shaped like a teardrop.

This image is of a mosaic on the front of the altar, pretty close to actual size. It is also a fairly literal rendition of the image that Jesus uses in our Gospel today, when he says, "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

I had pulled this photo up on my computer at work this week, after Jonathan called me to ask me to preach today. I was looking for some inspiration, but the reaction I got from coworkers walking by my desk was even more revealing.

Those folks who were not familiar with the Bible thought for some reason that it was hilarious to see a chicken portrayed in such a heroic pose, especially when I explained the metaphor to them. Those of a more religious bent were actually kind of bothered by the idea of Jesus represented as a chicken, let alone a female chicken. For some reason, in our culture, a hen doesn't seem very serious. Certainly not very dignified.

And the lowly hen doesn't have much of a biblical pedigree, either. God and the prophets are compared to eagles, to leopards, to lions: to tough, macho animals. But this scripture and its parallel in the Gospel of Matthew are the only places in the canonical scriptures that even mention the chicken.

The hen doesn't have much in the way of defenses. No teeth, puny little claws, not much strength. Especially when you compare her to the fox, as Jesus does here and as thousands of fables have done before him and after him. Once again, Jesus is turning our expectations upside down: the smart money is on the fox, but Jesus aligns himself with the chicken.

Just about all the hen has to offer is her willingness to sacrifice herself, to put herself between her chicks and the predator that would kill them one by one. All she can do is shield them with her own body: if the fox wants to get to them, he will have to kill her first. This is the kind of love that Jesus has for the children of Jerusalem.

The great Episcopal preacher Barbara Brown Taylor says, "If you have ever loved someone you could not protect, then you understand the depth of Jesus' lament. All you can do is open your arms. You cannot make anyone walk into them. Meanwhile, this is the most vulnerable posture in the world --wings spread, breast exposed -- but if you mean what you say, then this is how you stand."¹

All the hen has to offer is her refusal to abandon her children and her willingness to die for them, even as they ignore her and wriggle out from under her wings. All the hen has to offer is her faithfulness.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, "As a Hen Gathers Her Brood," (March 11, 2001), accessed at www.textweek.com March 3, 2007.

In Christian interpretation of Jewish tradition, Abram is held up as an example of faithfulness and obedience. Abram is known as the one who covenanted with God, and the reading we heard today from Genesis is often cited as proof of Abram's faithfulness and righteousness.

But let's look a little more carefully. This is not Abram's first experience of God. Prior to this passage, God has called Abram out of his homeland with the promise of good land, descendants who will be a great nation, and a legacy that will be a blessing to all the families of the earth.

And yet, by this point, Abram is having doubts. He has no children, and he is struggling with the Canaanites for the possession of the land. God's promises seem pretty remote, and Abram is asking for some reassurance.

Now, God does two things to solidify his relationship with Abram. This section has been interpreted in different ways throughout Christian tradition, often to emphasize the importance of Abram's faith, his willingness to obey God, and God's reward for that faith. I'd like to propose a slightly different interpretation based on some recent biblical scholarship. This interpretation puts the emphasis back on God's action, rather than on God's reaction to Abram.

The first thing that God does to reassure Abram is to reiterate the promise that Abram will be the father of innumerable descendants. "He brought him outside and said, 'Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.'"

In the NRSV, the next line is translated "And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness." Now, this is the translation we're all used to, but in fact it makes some assumptions that the Hebrew text just doesn't support. What the Hebrew says is, "And he believed the LORD; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness." The "he's" are just as ambiguous in the Hebrew as they are in English: either one can refer either to God or to Abram. In Hebrew literature, though, there is a rule of parallelism: If the order is *Abram, God* in the first sentence of a pair, it will almost always be *Abram, God* in the second sentence. Thus, according to many current Christian scholars², as well as to a long tradition of Jewish interpretation, what this verse is saying is, "And Abram believed the LORD; and Abram reckoned it to the LORD as righteousness."

Do you hear that? God is the one who is righteous! God is the one who is keeping promises. All Abram is doing is testifying to God's reliability.

Now moving on to the second thing that God does: the bloody ritual with the cut-up animals and the smoking firepot. Scholars tell us that this represents an ancient covenant ritual, one that is far older than Judaism. The parties to the agreement walk together between the halves of the butchered animals, with the

² Lloyd Gaston, "Abraham and the Righteousness of God," in *Paul and the Torah* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1987), pp. 45-63.

implied vow that, if either one doesn't keep his part of the bargain, may he also be cut up in the same way.

But in this case it is only the smoking firepot and the flaming torch, that is, the symbols of God, which pass between the sacrificed animals. Abram merely stands by and watches. In the symbolism of the covenant, God is the one making the vow, God is the one swearing an oath, God is the one formalizing the gift of the land to Abram and his descendants. Abram's part of the bargain is simply to stand by and say, "thank you, God."

We are people who want to believe that we are in control, that there is always something that we can do to help the process along. We talk about being saved by God's grace, but very often we seem to want to add an asterisk, "but of course, you have to have faith." We make faith into something that we need to do, something that we need to work on, to exercise, to whip into shape. It doesn't seem possible that God will remain faithful to such promises unless we do something to merit God's gifts.

But if we are willing to let God do what God has promised to do; if we are able just to get out of the way; if we are willing simply to say, "Thank you, God," then we can begin to realize that faith is something that God does, not something that we do.

God is the one who is faithful and righteous. God is the one who keeps promises, the one we can always count on. God is the one who will never forsake us. God's steadfast love does not falter.

In these stories, the writers of Genesis and the writers of the gospels are telling us that God will always be faithful, no matter how many times we question, no matter how many times we turn away, no matter how many times we refuse to be gathered under her wings. They are telling us that, no matter the danger, God will be there, putting herself between us and the foxes and predators of this world. God will be there with her wings outspread and her breast exposed, saving us at the cost of her own life. God will be there, stretched out on the hard wood of the cross, vulnerable, but refusing to abandon her children. God will be there.