

Lent 2: Episcopal Relief & Development Sermon Notes

Genesis 15:1-12,17-18

Abram desperately desires an heir, and God responds with a promise of vast abundance: God will bless Abram with heirs more numerous than the stars in the sky. Despite having every rational reason to doubt this, Abram believes. To add to this, God also reminds Abram of a history of past promises. This is to help Abram know that his heirs will inhabit the land to which God is leading them.

In our time, we might hope for what seems impossible. How can anyone believe that all of God's people might have enough to eat, adequate education and clean water? How can we believe that Haiti will emerge from the devastating earthquake and break the vicious cycle of poverty and exploitation? And yet we know that God has done great things for us and for the whole world. Perhaps, like Abram, we should have the courage to believe that God's abundant blessings can be made real, and then we should act on our belief. What might God be promising us? How are we called to change in response to those promises?

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Wouldn't it be nice if our focus were always on God, and not on earthly things? Paul writes about the "enemies of the cross," suggesting that their "god is the belly" and "their minds are set on earthly things." If we're honest, that description applies to all of us at times, even among those active in churches. It's easy to begin to think about earthly, practical things: buildings, budgets, committees and so on. But these things are not ends, they are means to help us proclaim God's kingdom. This is why the church exists. What would it mean if congregations kept their focus on heavenly things? How might we do a better job of proclaiming God's kingdom?

When Paul writes about people whose "god is the belly," he refers to our elevation of our own immediate gratification above our deeper relationship with God. It is interesting to note that the World Health Organization reports 1.6 billion people overweight, while the United Nations World Food Programme reports one billion people who are undernourished. If those of us in the developed world reduced our consumption, we would be healthier (thus taking care of the bodies God gave us) and there would be more resources for others. According to the University of Arizona, Americans waste 50% of all food that is harvested here. In addition to the spiritual cost of placing our god in our belly, there are real costs for our own health and that of others around the world. Do we sometimes find our "god is our belly," either through our food habits or through other habits of consumption (electronics, cars, clothing and so on)? What would it mean for us to live differently? Could we be healthier and closer to God?

Luke 13:31-35

Jesus is so often misunderstood by all those around him—his disciples, people he encounters and the crowds. And yet he is clear about his destiny. He understands that this fearful, sin-sick world seeks to defeat love, especially Love Incarnate. Jesus plaintively cries out his desire—God's desire—to gather God's children together with motherly care. Perhaps it's not so different in our time. We see and taste Jesus as we gather week by week. We have a sense of the radical call of our faith, but we subvert God's desire for a kingdom of justice, righteousness, hope and love.

During this season of Lent, we are called to scrutinize our lives—to relentlessly ask ourselves how we have fallen short of God's call to us and how we might have life, and have it abundantly. In a time of budget shortfalls across the church, it might seem impossible to set aside 0.7% of

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our budget to care for the poorest and most vulnerable people of our world. But perhaps that "impossible" sacrifice—small as it may be—would be enough to enable us to see our abundance. How else might we change our individual lives or our church communities to embrace the call of Jesus that we too often miss? What would it be like for us to enable God to reach into our lives, or into the lives of those in great need, and offer motherly care through basic needs of water, food, clothing, shelter, education or health care? What if we saw our efforts to alleviate suffering in Haiti not as charity, but as part of God's redemptive care for people made in the divine image?

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