

“Prepare with Joy”  
Lent 2c  
Genesis 15:1–12, 17–18

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In Jesus' Name.

There are some strange things in scripture, most of which do not find their way into the Sunday lectionary, the Sunday readings. The first reading today must have slipped by the censors. Have you ever heard anything as strange? Can you picture it? God told Abram, “Bring me a heifer, a goat, a ram, a turtledove and a pigeon.” Abram brought them and cut the large animals in two. He laid each half against the other and also the small birds, leaving a pathway up the middle. When the sun had gone down we are given to understand that God, in the form of a smoking fire pot and a fiery torch, passed between the pieces. In this way God made a covenant with Abram. God entered into a contract with Abram.

We understand contracts. Two or more parties enter into an agreement. Contracts line out certain things each party agrees to do and states the penalties if they don't do them. The mortgages we have on our homes are contracts. The bank extends us credit. Think about that word credit for a moment. It has the same root word as creed, a statement of belief. The bank believes in us and so provides the money to buy the house. Well, maybe it's not so much that the bank believes in us, but based on our history of paying bills and our current income the bank believes our promise to pay them with interest. And so we get to live in the house. If we don't fulfill our part of the contract, well, the bank owns the house. To seal the covenant we engage in a document-signing ceremony in the office of the mortgage broker. Can you imagine what house closings would look like if they called for a heifer, a goat, and a ram cut in pieces and laid opposite each other in the front lawn of the home you are buying for the banker and you to pass between?

Marriage is a contract. Each person promises “to have and to hold the other from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death parts us.” Husbands and wives have faith in each other. They extend credit to each other based on past experience during courtship but based mostly on an intangible -- their love for each other. When one party is not faithful the result is much more serious than a home foreclosure or a car being repossessed. God often compares his covenant with Israel to a marriage. God has been faithful; the people have not. Most of the words of the prophets, the harsh words of condemnation and the sweet words of courtship and longing, have to do with repairing the breach. Repairing the damage is hard work. But the sign of the covenant is the joining of hands and the giving and receiving of rings not animals slaughtered and laid over and against each other. Can you imagine what wedding ceremonies would look like if the bridal party did not pass between rows of admiring guests but rows of grisly sacrifice?

Has anyone made a sacrifice for you? Thinking back to that wedding procession of bride and groom, they pass between their parents and grandparents. These are some people who sacrificed for us. They did without so that we could have -- an education, financial security, health, and so much more. And Parents, we sacrifice for our children without second thoughts. I think of the sacrifice made by those who serve in local government, school boards, and the like. They are part of the social contract promoting the common good. They pursue what some identify as civil righteousness. There is no pay for this service. And the most outrageous slander is often directed at them. These sacrifices are not as bloody as the ones described in our first reading. They are, however, costly.

All covenants require sacrifice. All covenants have a cost. In the covenant of marriage, these about-to-be husbands and wives give their assent to love, comfort, honor and keep one another in sickness and in health and forsaking all others be

faithful to one another as long as they both shall live. When we bring our children for the covenant of baptism we promise to bring them with us to the services of God's house, even when we feel like staying in bed with coffee and the newspaper. We promise to place in their hands the Holy Scriptures and provide for their instruction in the Christian faith. In the affirmation of our Baptism covenant that happens at Confirmation we promise to live among God's faithful people, hear the Word of God and share in the Lord's Supper. We promise to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus, as does Paul in the second reading today, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.

All covenants require sacrifice. All covenants have a cost. In the covenant of today's first reading we learn the purpose of passing through the parts of sacrificed animals from one other example in the Bible. In Jeremiah 34 God says through the prophet, "Those who transgressed my covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant that they made before me, I will make like the calf when they cut it in two and passed between its parts...." In other words it was a covenant until death us do part. By passing through the parts of these sacrificed animals the parties making the covenant are saying, "May this be what happens to us if we do not keep the covenant."

This covenant ceremony often took place between nations. Most often the contract involved a super power and a smaller state. The smaller state promised to send the super power all their money every year and not to engage in rebellious plots. In return the super power promised not to wipe them off the face of the earth. In this instance the weaker party alone passed between the cut pieces as if to say, "This is what will happen to us and may this happen to us if we do not keep the covenant." All covenants require sacrifice. All covenants have a cost.

The covenant ceremony of Genesis 15 is not between equals. One would expect Abram to be the one making the grisly procession. However, God alone passed between the pieces of slain animals. God alone is saying, "I stake my life on my promises to you." In the same way, on the night Jesus was betrayed, he took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it for all to drink saying: This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin. Do this for the remembrance of me." This covenant required sacrifice. This covenant had a cost.

God's one-sided covenant works on us; it changes us. "Do not be afraid," God said to Abram. That is what God or God's angel always says to the faithful. God made these strange requests of Abram which he obeyed. Obedience is another work of faith.

Abram was surrounded by a hostile world. He recently had an encounter with what can only be described as terrorists who kidnapped his nephew Lot. Abram was not always fearless. There was a time when he took his eye off God and feared the Egyptian Pharaoh more than God. With a proper fear of God he was less afraid of all the other fearful things in his life. So, what are we afraid of? I have a recurring vision of my fear. I regularly picture the beloved professor standing in the elevator of the nursing home clutching the Greek New Testament he could no longer read. He couldn't even remember his room number. These fears make for brutal and pitiless gods. But God alone is to be feared. And what does the Lord God do with our fears. This is the God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. This God defeats death for us, gives us eternal life, and breathes his Holy Spirit upon us. He will not forget us even if our memory fails. "Fear not," God said to Abram. And Abram obeyed God.

We hear echoes of that in the Gospel today. Jesus obeyed God and trusted God with his life even in death. In today's Gospel reading Jesus is headed for Jerusalem. On the way he laments over the people who kill the prophets and stone those whom God sends. He laments for the very ones who will put him to death. As a hen gathers her

brood under her wings so would Jesus gather them but they were not willing. God in Christ stakes his life on us. And he calls us to trust him, to extend to him the credit of our faith. The down payment God makes is Jesus' resurrection from the dead. We trust God to make good on the promise to raise us also.

As a part of every communion service the presiding minister sings a preface. The preface for Lent calls us to prepare with joy for the paschal feast. That is the feast of victory in which we join together every Lord's Day, every Sunday, in anticipation of the heavenly Sunday when all God's people will eat their fill. In the Lenten preface the presiding minister prays on our behalf, asking God to renew our zeal in faith and life. Like Abram may we go out with God's command "Fear not," ringing in our ears. May we go out less afraid of all the fearful things in our lives. May we go out fearless in our obedience to God.