

St. Andrew's Cathedral
Jackson, Mississippi
Sermon for March 17, 2019 ~ Lent 2C
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If we were not feeling insecure about streaking asteroids, gun violence in New Zealand and at home, unrest in the Middle East, Congressional impasse, the President's border crisis, or the progress of the transition in the parish, we'd find something else about which to be anxious. I don't mean to minimize these significant issues in the least, but the feeling of insecurity is a fact of life. And I'm always fascinated how one anxious person can raise the level of anxiety in an emotional system – family, political unit, workplace, or church.

Historically, the People of God are supposed to have an edge in coping with that feeling. Yet, from all outward appearances, we are not coping much better than anyone else. The edge of which I speak is the promise of divine protection for those who place their trust in God and live according to God's will. Regardless of what happens to the economy, regardless of the senseless acts of terrorists, and regardless of how long a transition may take, unless we are living in the covenant relationship with God, we have no real security.

Abraham was seventy-five years old, childless, and without any land of his own when God spoke to him in a vision. God's first words to Abraham not only told him of his unique role but also promised him divine protection if he would accept that role. God must have sensed Abraham's anxiety and insecurity because the Divine Voice said: "Do not be afraid, Abraham, I will shield you from danger and give you a great reward."

These words with which the Sovereign God introduced the covenant with Abraham and Abraham's descendants are words spoken to us as well – for those who trust God as Abraham trusted God are Abraham's descendants. Abraham found favor with God not because he was born that way or had the right surname or lived in the right neighborhood or had the right ethnic heritage. He found favor because he trusted God, in spite of his feelings of insecurity. Trust triumphed over terror!

How much better we would feel about our destinies and ourselves if those words were inscribed on the ceiling above our beds where we could see them upon waking and upon retiring: "Do not be afraid _____. I will shield you from danger and give you a great reward." To begin and end each day knowing you are unique, that God has chosen you, and that God has a special role for you in the divine scheme of things solidifies our identity and purpose in that relationship, and not in any other. Because that identity and purpose is given to us by our Creator, we need not live lives that are limited by feelings of insecurity. [see *A Collect for Peace*, p.99 BCP]

You might think this is strange advice. Abraham thought so at first. He said, "Sovereign Lord, what good will your reward do me since I have no children?" God showed Abraham the sky and told him his descendants would be more numerous than the stars. Abraham needed even more reassurance, so God instructed him to prepare a covenant ceremony. That covenant ceremony was a turning point in history. In this covenant, God made a promise with a people who would impact the history of the human race. When the sun had set, God ratified the covenant with fire and smoke.

The description of the ceremony that seals the covenant is strange and seems to us to smack of magic and superstition. But it reflects the customs of the time. A smoking pot and flaming torch passing back and

forth between the two sides of an animal that had been split in half relates to the custom of two parties of a covenant doing likewise, the implication being that if either breaks the covenant, that one's fate will be like that of the slain animal. In this ancient custom, we find the origin of the expression "to cut a deal." God has never broken that covenant. Certainly, Abraham's descendants have broken it countless times through their lack of trust and disobedience. Because of their own resistance, they have felt cut apart and lost and afraid. And, I might add, the inability of the followers of the Abrahamic faiths to live in peace is but one expression of that ongoing insecurity and inability to trust God. Yet, all of those faiths continue to declare that God has always remained faithful to the promise made to Abraham.

When we remember that covenant and meditate upon the faithfulness of God and place our trust in God and God's promise, we remain whole. Our lives are not divided. We are aware of our unique vocation. We can begin and end each day with confidence because we know we are in the secure protection of the One who is absolutely trustworthy. We can have a security within ourselves which fluctuations in the economy, acts of terrorists or Congress, or the federal budget cannot destroy.

St. Paul had that sense of security and protection. It transformed his life. He called upon those early Christians to follow his example and stand firm in their life in the Lord. He knew it was this inner security and reliance upon the promises of God that brought about the salvation of the world. The Savior had it! When some Pharisees came and warned him that Herod sought to kill him, he could have been terrified. Insecurity could have taken hold and he could have abandoned his mission. Even knowing that he could end up like the prophets who had gone before him, aware that a cross lay beyond the acclamations of the crowd that followed him, he went on his way, doing exactly what he knew to be God's will for him.

Perhaps you are thinking, "Wait a minute! Doesn't the cross contradict God's promise of protection? On the contrary. The cross verifies it. Even the cross couldn't defeat God's purpose. God's faithfulness and protection will not be undone, even by suffering and death. You can't stop Easter!"

Nowhere in the scriptures does God promise that being the People of God will be easy. But God did promise to be with us, keeping us together at all times. Those hard times that try us and test us also polish us and refine us, making us stronger and more confident. And, when God's people confront the fickle forces that threaten us with various kinds of crosses, we will not be torn into because we are heirs of God's promise of protection and fellow heirs with Jesus who said, "Behold, I have overcome the world."

We have a way of being lulled into a false sense of security when we are getting our bodily desires satisfied, whatever that may mean to you. Whenever we draw our security from the things that seem to satisfy those desires, they become our gods. Whenever that happens, we become like those of whom the prophet lamented, "They pray to gods that cannot save." And, whenever we put our lives on the line for such gods, we are bound to be let down in the end. The God of Abraham is the only sure source of protection and our deepest needs can only be satisfied when we are living faithfully in the covenant relationship established by that God.

If the goal of your life is God's goal and is glorious enough for you to trust God to help you pursue it, you will be willing to pay the price. You will joyfully take up your cross, not with a curse, but with a doxology, and pursue that goal unencumbered by feelings of insecurity, but liberated by God's promise of protection. Each of us owes it to God and to the rest of us to be responsible for letting trust in God help us manage how we participate in the community of trust. That's how we manage our insecurities and anxieties; we start with our own. When something happens or when someone says something to us that makes us feel anxious, it's a time to stop, take a deep breath, and ask ourselves, "Where is that feeling coming from?"

Where is the trust I need to overcome that feeling? How can I rise above my primitive flight or fight instincts and respond from a perspective that is shaped by reason and faith in God. After all, I'm not a lizard or a toad; I'm a human being, created in the image of God, endowed with amazing gifts with which to pursue life as God intends it to be pursued. The call to trust in God is an invitation to become more human, to rely more on the uniquely human gifts and less on instincts.

“Do not be afraid! I will shield you from danger and give you a great reward.” That’s the promise we celebrate in Baptism and in the Holy Eucharist. That’s the promise that makes our worship passionate. That’s an everlasting, indelible, unbreakable promise from God and not even death can take it away. That’s why we say, “____, you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ’s own *for ever*.” That means, “Do not be afraid! I will shield you from danger and give you are great reward.” People are looking for a God like that, whom they can worship and serve with all their heart, soul, and mind. And it is our vocation to be the kind of community in which that God, enthroned upon our praises, is known to those who are seeking.