

**Pentecost 12C, Proper 14. Gen 15:1-6; Heb 11:1-3, 8-16;
Luke 12:32-40. August 7, 2016.**

What are these stories supposed to do? Every Sunday we read four passages from the bible, and they go a long way to shaping what our hour together that week is like, but that isn't the extent of their work. Of course we don't just come here to pass a pleasant hour together, but in some way to be changed, to leave this place and these people as someone a little bit different from who we came in as—somehow more human, more grounded, more open to God and to the brothers and sisters with whom we share this fragile life. And for that to happen, these stories can't just be theme-setters for an hour long program that otherwise looks pretty similar each week. If we take them seriously, they have the capacity to change us.

They can do that in many ways, from encouraging us, to convicting us, to changing our behavior, to providing comfort. Oh, and of course they sometimes mostly confuse us, which can itself be life-changing, if we're shaken out of an easy complacency. But what I think they can best do today is give us a way of interpreting what's going on in our lives. The stories from the bible and of Christian history don't always tell us what we should do next. Sometimes what they do best is to give us ways to understand the world, ways to approach forging meaningfulness in the hurly burly of our lives. In short, asking these stories to tell us "why" is often more appropriate than asking them to tell us "what," at least in terms of actions that we might take.

And today's reading from the Hebrew Bible struck me as particularly appropriate for the lostness and horror of this summer. Because in this story we get a glimpse at Abram after he has heard the divine promise, but before he's seen any evidence that fulfillment is on its way. We are reading today from chapter 15, but Abram first appears in chapter 12, where he is introduced while receiving God's promise of a place and people to call home. And that sets moving a pattern of God showing up, making promises to Abram, and then Abram's life going on with some triumphs and some very dark days, but no indication that the promised land and people are anywhere on the horizon. God keeps coming back and making promises, Abram keeps doing his best and worst, and then God comes back again with the same dazzling promises. In the end, Abram doesn't see his people in the promised land, but the first of the promised people does show up in chapter 21 of Genesis.

And this, I think, is where we are. Every Sunday we come here and we hear and make certain promises. We are assured of forgiveness, we celebrate and anticipate resurrection, we eat a holy meal that we believe binds us together into one people: beloved, blessed, and empowered by God. For an hour we are assured by the whole liturgy that, in the words of Julian of Norwich, all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well. And then we go back out into the world and do our best and our worst and everything in between—and something terrible happens and the world seems to get a little bit worse, and then we come back in a week to talk about resurrection and to eat and to sing and to pray, and to be made one with ourselves, each other, and Jesus Christ.

It is a brutal cycle, and today keeps it up. In Luke's gospel, Jesus tells us "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." And frankly, that promise comes across like the recording when you're on hold with Comcast for two hours that reminds you how important your call is to them. If God is pleased to give us the kingdom that will stop all this hatred and killing, well, I don't think any of us would object to receiving it.

And I think this is where Abram, poised between hearing and receiving, and the interpretation of his story given in the Epistle to the Hebrews, can really help us. The Epistle to the Hebrews riffs on Abraham's story, without cleaning it up to make it look like an uninterrupted procession from promise to promised land. Abraham (who is the same guy as Abram) is the author's exemplar of faith, but he "stayed for a time in the land he had been promised as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise." And "All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland."

My dear people, I can't think of a better description for living Christian in the summer of 2016. We have heard, but not received the promise of the kingdom of God. Many of you have worked your whole lives to make this world better, and it's currently pretty hard to see us headed for the promised land. And I'm sure that many of us will lead long lives and die without having received the fulfillment of the promises around which we build our lives. But—but from a distance I insist that we can see the kingdom of God and greet it, even if we can't stay awake until it finally gets here. We see it in glimpses: in each other's eyes; in people gathered around a table, sharing their lives as surely as they share the bread; in the French Muslims who attended Mass last week in solidarity after the martyrdom of Pere Jacques Hamel in Rouen; in our kids if we have them; in friends making sacrifices to help a neighbor; every time we say Yes to life and love with the frankness of our full selves, without reservation.

I know, it's such a small thing—the whole world is mad with hatred and violence and the church offers you the look in someone's eye. But these looks, these small actions, aren't just themselves—they are fleeting glimpses of the kingdom of God that has come near. The same kingdom that Jesus compared to a farmer scattering seeds along a path, a measure of yeast in a massive batch of bread, a lost treasure, a found pearl, a net full of fish. This kingdom of seeds and pearls, of smiles and bread, though, is the world as it can be, the world God will bring about, a world where justice and mercy clasp hands, where love is as natural as gravity. It isn't here, but it comes and we glimpse it from far away, greet it, and give our lives to it.

Refusing to close our eyes to the glimpses of God's grace makes us strangers here, pilgrims seeking our homeland in the way the world can be, not the way it is. People who cannot feel at home in a world where 441 people were shot in Chicago last month, and so cannot help but try to find our homeland by trying to build it. It is not easy to live as people made foreigners by our faith in promises that have not yet been fulfilled, but our faith in these promises is what lets us see those enlivening glimpses of the kingdom of God in the so small acts of our friends, neighbors, enemies, and ourselves. And finally, against all odds, this faith lets us interpret the future with hope.