

God calls us to be citizens of heaven.

Ge 12:1-18; Ps 27; Phil 3:17-14:1; L 13:31-35

Read Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

I suspect most of us can identify with hard times. It might have been an accident or a health issue or financial difficulties. And we are surrounded by natural disaster, political shenanigans and economic favoritism like corporate welfare. The world seems in more trouble and more dangerous today than it has for a while. Refugees, violence, wars and corruption seem all around us. And we have all kinds of moral and ethical failures by church leaders, institutions & denominations. It would be abnormal to not be a little depressed today. At these times we wonder – where is God? Why is my life out of control? Why are so many things going wrong all at once? Life is hard when we feel helpless and powerless. We wonder – how will we get through this? When will life be normal and safe?

Our focus statement from today's lectionary sermon idea is: When dark fear overwhelms us, God gather us together in safe shelter. We seek the light of God's face. I'm adding God calls us to faith - to live as citizens of heaven.

I'd like us to look at all four scripture texts this morning because each of them gives us some advice on handling dark times. They all invite us to faith – to be citizens of heaven, to be gathered together in safe shelter in some way.

In Genesis, Abraham had been promised that he would be the father of a great nation – but Sarah stayed barren. Talk about needing to see some action. I suspect that at times Abraham thought – “Promises, promises, that's all I get from you God.” So God had to give Abraham renewed assurance. But still, at his age Abraham I suspect couldn't help but wonder.

He had already demonstrated his faith. He had left home and followed God's leading to another country. They did this at the prompting of a voice. Without a map. I didn't

fully know what I was getting into when I went to Brasil as a missionary, but I had a general job description, a salary, grew up as a missionary kid, a stable government, the support of MCC and the mission board. Plus, I knew where I was to go. But Abraham didn't have all this.

What I like about Abraham and Sarah's story is the portrait we have of faith - the only kind of faith the Bible talks about - is not an easy thing. It is a gift one must struggle to receive one's whole life long. All they had to rely on was a voice, which may have been God's voice or maybe just an undigested matzoh ball. But I suspect most of us would call what they did, faith. Faith is acting on the assurance of things hoped for but not seen and all that. It's following the lead of your heart and your belief in God, usually not knowing what, where or why.

One of the biggest surprises I had as a missionary wasn't in Brasil or Papua New Guinea. It was here in Canada and the United States. When I visited churches to share about our work and promote the mission board, at times I ran into people who put me on a pedestal. But often these same people bluntly told me, “I would never go overseas and I won't let my children go.” I never did find a way of responding that people liked.

Who knows why Abrahams father Terah, as well as Abram and Sarai trusted the voice enough to do such a reckless thing. But they did; and it still fills us with wonder when we think about it.

But, the day came when they lost that faith - or at least lost whatever it was that had brought him that far. Not that they hadn't been tempted to give up along the way; because, of course, they had. But at one point after living with the promise for years, Abram had finally had enough.

That's when the voice spoke again and said, "Go outside and look up at the stars. How

many can you count? That's how many YOUR offspring will be." And Abram went outside and looked up - and believed. Of course, this thing the voice was telling him was still ridiculous. It was still too good to be true. But for some reason that night Abram gave up deciding whether it could or could not be true. He just decided to believe what he had been told & to settle down and wait for it.

And the point of this ancient story is that faith is something that does not come easily. The real thing is not something you get all at once or lose all at once. It is the continuous, committed, active response to a call and a promise in the face of real doubts, deep questions & painful struggle. That is why Abraham and Sarah are remembered in scripture. That is what the Bible calls faith. And it's where we find safe shelter, God's light, and our eternal citizenship.

Read Philippians 3:17-4:1

The Philippian Christians struggled with a problem we also face every day: how to live as disciples of Jesus Christ in a hostile environment in which the majority of our neighbours do not share our convictions. A recent poll tells us that in the 1960's & 70's, 90% of Canadians attended Sunday worship. That figure today is 12%. I'm not sure those are accurate numbers, but it does indicate a major trend and change in this country.

The Apostle Paul's advice was to follow his example as he followed Christ in living in this world, but with totally different values to guide them: "In the world, but not of it." Paul refers to the hope of resurrection so that we shall not only be with Christ, but be like him when he returns.

Mohandas Gandhi once remarked, "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. You Christians are so unlike your Christ." This is still true today. It's not just the leaders and priests of the Catholic Church we can point to as bad examples. Many Protestant leaders and

pastors today have been caught and accused of abusive behavior and loving wealth. Some denominations are in turmoil because of immoral or unethical or illegal behavior by many leaders and key figures. It's disappointing, depressing, and self defeating.

So when someone points to the mishaps of a professed Christian as a reason not to embrace the faith, we may tell them to look at Jesus instead. This usually doesn't convince people. And it's logical to get defensive or quiet or to accommodate that opinion.

But in our scripture, Paul calls his audience to imitate him. This may seem to be an expression of insufferable vanity. However, Paul had just used himself as a negative example of putting stock in one's own status and accomplishments before God. He now regards these as rubbish for the sake of knowing Christ (chapter 3). Paul does not want his audience to imitate false teachers who valued external ritual practices like circumcision (3:1-3). But he wants his audience to imitate him in throwing off all external markers for the single-minded pursuit of sharing in Christ's suffering and knowing the power of his resurrection (3:10-11). Paul doesn't shy away from telling how bad a person he was, or how good a Jew he was - but then he says - it wasn't enough to please the Almighty God.

So the imitation point Paul is making is, model your life on Christ, reflected in the words "for to me, living is Christ and dying is gain" (1:22). For Paul, all of life is captured in Christ so that everything Paul does is generated by Christ and done for his sake. For this reason, Paul provides Jesus Christ as the ideal, exemplary example for his audience to follow. He calls them to think and act in humility and self-sacrificial service towards each other. The fruits of the Spirit are not just nice sounding traits. We are to look at how Jesus acted in boldness and love and clarity about his call, towards and for humanity in his incarnation and in his crucifixion. This kind of living landed Paul in prison and Jesus on the cross. But it

clarified their citizenship in heaven and the place and type of their safe shelter.

So like Abraham, God tells us – look at the stars instead of bareness. Stop setting our minds on earthly things, our own desires, and instead look to Paul’s example and Jesus’ example. Paul is saying some people have not denied Christ by their confession or words, but have denied Christ by their behavior. They are enemies of the cross of Christ because they refuse to conform to the pattern of humility and self-sacrifice that led Jesus there. That’s where safety and light are!

Be heavenly minded. Paul reminds us that our true citizenship is in heaven and not on this earth. Philippi was a Roman colony, so many of the people were Roman citizens. But Paul redefines the citizenship of the Christian. Paul uses the present tense, “our citizenship *is* in heaven,” which calls them to enact their true citizenship now in a foreign land. This is where our eternal safety lies. Within the Creator’s powerful light. Notice that in 3:17 Paul asks his audience to “join together” in imitating him. The kind of living to which he calls us is not a solitary job, but must be done in community.

Paul ends this section of scripture with the encouragement to: “stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!” This is how we demonstrate we are citizens of heaven. This is where real light & safety lies. God with us now & eternally.

Read Luke 13:31-35

This is a fascinating and heart breaking story. First it’s the Pharisee’s, Jesus’ enemies that warn Jesus that Herod wants to kill him. Were they trying to scare him to get him to go away? But Jesus was clear about his mission, so he said, “‘I will keep on driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.’ In any case, I must press on today and tomorrow and the next day - for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!”

Is the place of safety – following God’s call – no matter what? It seems Jesus was also predicting his resurrection – the earthly end of his work. And then he slyly implies, only God’s prophets to Israel can die in Jerusalem.

Jesus points out the double mindedness of Israel and its capital Jerusalem. They kill God’s prophets. Jerusalem is not a safe place for them, but it’s also “the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes as his habitation to put his name there” (Dt 12:5). The city God chose to inhabit becomes the seat of such violent opposition to God is part of the ironic tragedy of Israel’s own story, including Jesus’ story. But instead of fleeing to safety – Jesus keeps heading to Jerusalem. He has resisted temptation, set his course, & clarified that he is a citizen of heaven.

But then immediately following this indictment we have the compassionate and agonized plea of Jesus, speaking for God, longing to shelter the children of Israel like a mother hen does for her brood. However, punishment is announced in verse 35: “your house is left to you desolate,” which is probably a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70. But I also think it’s referring to the people rejecting Jesus – especially the Jewish religious leaders. And then Jesus ends with a prophecy that Jerusalem will, at least for a moment, recognize who is really is, referring to his triumphal entry.

Throughout Lent we are preparing ourselves to experience Jesus’ cross. This Luke story calls us to do so by considering whether our lives lead appropriately to that cross. Can we make sense of our lives as a part of the establishment of God’s kingdom in our world? Or are we frightened from our mission by the threats of earthly rulers? Can we look at the stars as we hear God’s promises and keep up our faith? Can we claim our citizenship in heaven over the demands all around us to have other competing allegiances? Can we be models of

Christlikeness, reflecting the face of the Almighty's light, that people want to follow?

Moreover, if Jesus were to speak prophetically to us, what would his message be today? How have we resisted God's messages and kingdom? Paul refers to the church as a temple, as the dwelling of God's Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). Do our lives reflect God's Holy Spirit? Or do we have the tragic style of Jerusalem? On the other hand, how have we recognized God's messages and kingdom, and how can we continue to do so?

May we when dark fear overwhelms us, seek God's safe shelter. May we see the light of God's face as we see the stars. May we stick to faith and live as citizens of heaven. May we resonate with the words of Psalm 27. Let's read what's on the screen prayerfully & triumphantly.