

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 2nd Sunday of Lent, March 17, 2019.

Last week we suggested a basic Lenten discipline, one that begins the day with a thank you to God and ends the day with a thank you to God. As simple as this sounds, most of us find it difficult to implement. Things get in the way. We get distracted. In the morning we feel rushed. At bedtime we feel exhausted. Something has to give, and often what gives is our best intentions.

So, what do we have this week? Well, we have a set of lessons that seek to reassure us that, while we might have fallen short, we should not give up. This assurance comes in a variety of ways.

First, we have Abraham (**Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18**) who is concerned that his marriage is childless, which means that there will be no heir. God quickly reassures Abraham: “Do not be afraid, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great ... look toward heaven and count the stars ... so shall your descendants be.”

The Lord not only reassures Abraham that there will be an heir. He reminds Abraham that the descendants will have a wonderful home. “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.”

Here’s the short version of the Lord’s assurance. “Relax, Abraham, everything is going to be okay.”

Then we have **Psalms 27**, which reinforces the notion of “everything will be okay.” And it does so in pretty dramatic fashion. It lists a series of events that have the potential to devastate Abraham and his people. There is the possibility of an army encamped against Abraham. There is the possibility of a war rising up against Abraham. There are adversaries that bear false witness against Abraham.

But none of these threats will succeed according to the Psalm. Abraham accepts this assurance. “Hearken to my voice, O Lord, when I call; have mercy on me and answer me.”

Well, so far, so good. But now we come to St. Paul's letter to the early Church at Philippi (**Philippians 3:17-4:1**). Most, if not all, of Paul's ministry involved sustaining the hopes of these outposts of faith. He would encourage one community and then head off to encourage another community. The need for encouragement never seemed to stop. To the Philippians he writes, "Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved." With tears, he urges his listeners not to live as "enemies of Christ." He notes that "their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame. ... Don't be like them."

Today's lessons end with a passage from Luke's gospel (**Luke 13:31-35**). The setting is post-River Jordan. John has recognized that Jesus is different than all the other Messiah candidates. And Jesus is beginning to believe this as well. He is feeling his oats, as it were. And these "oats" are causing concern among the authorities. Even the Pharisees, the letter of the law folks, are urging Jesus to tone it down. "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you."

Jesus says, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.'" Talk about poking the bear. Jesus really is feeling his oats. And he will continue to do so until he is crucified. But, as we know, the "oats" will rise. But not just yet.

Right now, he is in the business of healing. This is reassurance at its most dramatic. This is more than "Don't worry, things are bound to improve." This is "You are healed. Go on your way. Your faith had made you whole."

All four of these lessons are designed to sustain us as we seek to know the Lord more fully. Observing the Season of Lent is part of this sustaining effort. We set a course, which we believe we can handle. Only to discover that it's a tougher course than we thought. Even a simple daily morning thank you and a simple daily evening thank you can be a struggle. To the point that we consider giving up. We'll try again next year.

Today's lessons say no. We are not alone in our efforts to honor God this holy Season. We have company. We have the Lord himself. Think of him as a spiritual trainer.

We all need trainers to achieve results. Some of you are trainers. Others have trainers. There's no need for a trainer if we can do things on our own. But, when we can't – and that is often – we need help. If we forget one morning to say "Thank you, Lord" or one evening to say "Thank you, Lord." we don't have to end our Lenten exercise. There's a new day. In fact, there are forty new days. We don't have to wait until next year. We can get back on our Lenten horse right away.

Well, this might all sound frivolous, but that's the nature of most disciplines. They sound easy. "I can do that ... no sweat." Until we try to do it. Then we find out how tough it can be. But also how rewarding it can be if we stay with it. And the key to staying with it is not perfection – there will be distractions and setbacks – but faith that progress can be made and goals achieved.

For people of religious conviction, that faith is grounded in the Resurrection. Normally death is end of story, but not so in the case of Jesus. There is life beyond failure. There is always a new day. Things can get better, no matter how bleak things seem. We have seen loved ones, in the midst of great pain, manage a smile. Those gestures need to be wake-up calls for you and me.

Missing a Lenten morning or evening "thank you" is not a life and death issue. It doesn't have to derail a commitment to acknowledge God for all of our blessings. God waits all the time on you and me. God puts up with all sorts of shortcomings. God knows that when we promise to do better, we might or might not succeed.

But God never drops us from His rolls. The Lord is always with us. Which is the Lord's way of saying "Keep trying, you'll get there. In fact, you're already there, but you might not know it yet." By the way, that's who Jesus is: God's appointed means of reminding us that the Lord is always with us.

We observe this weekend the feast day of St. Patrick, patron saint of Ireland. There's a beautiful hymn, perhaps written by Patrick himself, which underscores this notion of the Lord being always with us. You'll recognize these lyrics:

- Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me, Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me.

- Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger, Christ in hearts of all that love me, Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

Our final hymn today uses the phrase “far off yet here” to describe our Lenten experience, and indeed our entire experience of faith. Not “far off yet near” – think Advent - but “far off yet here” – think Christmas. For all of God’s power and might, God is more than close. He is waiting to be received. If we keep at it, that meeting will happen, to which we can eagerly say, morning and evening, “Thank you, Lord.”

Amen.