



ST. LUKE IN THE FIELDS
CELEBRATING 200 YEARS

“STEADFAST FAITH”
SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT-YEAR C

GENESIS 15: 1-12, 17-18

PSALM 27

PHILIPPIANS 3:17-4:1

LUKE 13: 31-35

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY
MARCH 13, 2022

Today's Collect prays that we may have "penitent hearts" and "steadfast faith". We hear a lot about penitence at the start of Lent. What about "steadfast faith"? If our faith wavers, have we somehow failed?

Abram and Sarai (as they were first named) are wonderful examples of steadfast faith as we reflect on this. God says to Abram when Abram is 75 (!): *Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land which I will show you. I will make of you a great nation... and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.* Abram leaves everything, and sets off for an unknown, unmapped destination. All Abram and Sarai have is a promise heard with the ears of faith.

Looking back on their lives, we see them as a steady journey of faithfulness. But to a person *on* a faith journey, it often feels uncertain and precarious. In the eyes of the secular world, actions taken in faith can look irrational and ineffective.

By today's episode, Abram has been waiting for God to fulfill his promises for decades. Today Abraham – steadfast, exemplary Abraham – thinks perhaps he

misheard God and proposes his Plan B. “I have designated Eliezer of Damascus, a trusted servant, as my heir”, Abram reminds God. Abram will turn 99 before his son Isaac is born – 24 years after God first promises. God is no respecter of age in any sense. Abram today also questions God about the land for his hypothetical descendants: *How shall I know I am to possess it?* Abraham questions and doubts. Steadfast faith can have all these elements. Yet God doesn’t simply say Go to Abram. God provides one help after another – angels, messengers, allies, no matter what the obstacle at hand. God doesn’t usually lay out every step in sequence all the way to the end, but what we are given – like Abram – is enough light to take the *next* step, and then the next. Abram’s faith is not primarily a feeling. Abram’s faith is acting each day as though God is trustworthy. Scripture tells us that Abram’s habit of trusting God is *reckoned to him as righteousness*. It is belief translated into action. It is good enough for God that Abram acts on the next step. Abram is renamed Abraham, meaning “ancestor of a multitude”. God keeps God’s promises and leaves markers to remind

us. Abram leaves markers too. Abram builds an altar at each place where he encounters God. This is important: that we honor those places where God speaks to us.

Last Sunday, Scott and I were in the UK for a family wedding and we went to church on Holy Island or Lindisfarne. Lindisfarne is cut off from the mainland at high tide. Along with St. Columba in the 6th century on Iona off the west coast of Scotland, the priory at Lindisfarne was a powerhouse of Christian mission from the 7th century with St. Aidan and St. Cuthbert spreading the light of the gospel and learning in those brutal times. I have been to Lindisfarne many times but the thing that struck me most on this visit was how tiny the monastic community there was. At its largest in the 13th century, scholars believe that Lindisfarne had 10 monks. 10 monks to do all that work of faith: copying manuscripts (the Lindisfarne gospels), the praying of offices, daily Mass. All the work of the monastery, the baking, the farming, the cooking, the brewing, hospitality to pilgrims, taking care of the sick in the infirmary. 10 monks! So now scholars realize that there must have been

all kinds of lay brothers and local people involved in maintaining the monastery. This reminds me that steadfast faith is something we do together in community, it is not the work of heroic individuals alone; together we support each other's faith and service.

There were many times in Lindisfarne's history when all seemed lost. The Vikings invaded several times. Precious treasures like the Lindisfarne gospels and the relics of St. Cuthbert had to be relocated to Durham for safety. Once the church of England broke from Rome, Henry VIII got his hands on Lindisfarne in the first wave of the dissolution of the monasteries in 1536, to help pay for his foreign wars.

But despite foreign and domestic threats to Lindisfarne, all was not lost. The Lindisfarne gospels survive, and to this day Lindisfarne symbolizes what steadfast faith can do. Small and mighty Lindisfarne that spread the light of Christ far beyond the small island and guarded the light of faith in dark times.

Steadfast faith always looks to the future, because we know that there will *be* a future, and God will

shepherd it. No matter how desperate times are, God is trustworthy.

In the face of atrocities in Ukraine, the bombing of hospitals and mosques, the suffering of the defenseless in Mariupol as we speak, it is easy to feel that our faith is insignificant. What difference can faith make in the face of such evil and inhumanity? There are obvious ways that we can express our belief in a God of peace and justice. We can donate to relief organizations; we can help those in need where *we* live.

But there is another dimension of steadfast faith that is also important. Faith pushes back the boundaries of darkness. Faith is a resistance movement. Faith resists in word and deed the spread of self-serving greed, ambition, cruelty and indifference to others. Faith reminds us every day of God's vision for humanity. Our faith reminds us that the measure of humanity is greater than what we produce or acquire. Our prayers and faithful actions guard the flame of Christ's love in this corner of the world. Because of Jesus, we can share a hope-full future for all humanity.

Finally our faith reminds us as the Collect says that the glory of God is “always to have mercy”. God’s ultimate power is revealed not in victory, getting even with enemies, or any measure of worldly triumph, but in mercy. God is so strong that God chooses compassion and mercy. And so as people of faith, we pray for those who are merciless. Where else but through the eternal light of the gospel do we learn such mature wisdom as that mercy and love are the greatest strength of all? That loving our enemies has greater power to change the world than war? I make no apology for saying that faith is the single greatest untapped resource of humanity today. Whether it is mature Christianity, or mature Judaism or Islamic faith, mature Hinduism, or Buddhism. No-one’s god, rightly understood, says “Hate your neighbor”. All of the great world religions in mature form elevate the dignity of every human being and recognize the Divine spark in all created things. For us, Jesus is the fullest revelation of God. For us, when all seems hopeless, we are called to devote ourselves heart, soul, mind and body to serving Christ through serving others with even greater

commitment. We will find, like Abraham, that God is worthy of our praise and love and trust every day of our lives until our journey's end.

AMEN

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