

Genesis 15:1-6
Luke 13:31-35

UNDER THE CANOPY OF LOVE

A church member invited his minister to visit his new home and barn. The minister brought him a housewarming present, a weather vane with the motto, "God is love" on it. The parishioner asked, "Does that mean God's love is as changeable as the wind?" The minister replied, "No, indeed. It means that God is love whichever way the wind blows."

Throughout the biblical witness, God's love is immutable or unchanging. God's love is a constant reality for us all. Whatever is going on in the world, in your world or my world, the one thing we can count on to remain true is God's love, year after year, for all eternity. I am reminded of those moving words in the hymn, Abide With Me: "Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day; Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away; Change and decay in all around I see, O Thou who changest not, abide with me."

God's love is not as changeable as the wind. God is still love, no matter which way the wind is blowing! However, humankind's love is certainly changeable. It's an on-again, off-again matter of the heart. We love when it suits our purposes, but we can just as easily dispense with love if things don't go our way. In the Bible, we see repeatedly the rebellious nature of the people of God. Called into a holy covenant with the Lord - "I will be your God, and you will be my people" - God remained faithful to the covenant while Israel, time and time again, was unfaithful. And, in the Bible, which quite often acts like a mirror, we see our own reflection and it is distorted!

In Genesis 12, Yahweh first came to Abram and his wife, Sarai, and promised to bless them with a great nation and a land. However, the years went by and nothing had happened, nothing had changed. When the Lord God came to Abram in a vision and told him, "Your reward shall be very great," Abram's response was less than enthusiastic. Twice, he reminded the Lord that he was childless and most likely, he surmised, his slave or servant, would become the heir. Abram had all but given up on God and God's fancy promises of a great name, nation and land. Abram had little cause to hope in the future.

God told Abram that his slave would not be his heir; instead, "no one but your very own issue shall be your heir." Then, Yahweh brought Abram outside and told him to gaze up at the stars and, if he were able, to count them all. "So shall your descendants be." The Lord had Abram step foot outside of his tent and gaze up at the canopy of love stretched out overhead. When God reminded Abram that his descendants would be as innumerable as the stars, Abram's anxiety over the future was replaced by peaceful trust. He believed the Lord and that, in turn, restored Abram to a right relationship with the Lord God. Although Abram would not live long enough to see all of his hopes and dreams become a reality, he had seen enough. He was faithful once again.

In the New Testament lesson for today, we see God's faithfulness especially revealed in Jesus. And, Abram's unfaithfulness is now reflected in his descendants, the people of Israel in general and the inhabitants of Jerusalem in particular.

As Jesus made his way to Jerusalem, he was warned by some Pharisees to get out of the area for Herod wanted to kill Jesus. No doubt Herod would make good his threat if given the chance because he had already beheaded John the Baptist. But Jesus refused to listen or to leave. He was unwilling to be dissuaded from

the course he had set; he remained steadfast and faithful to his mission of casting out demons and performing cures. Jesus said, "I must be on my way," and that put him on a deliberate crash course with the religious authorities in Jerusalem. Jesus knew the outcome that awaited him in Jerusalem; he also knew that "it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem."

With that, Jesus stretched out his arms in grief and wept, saying: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" Jesus wanted nothing less than to gather God's people under the canopy of his love and protect them from the evil that was loose on the land.

While a prairie fire was sweeping over the Midwest some years ago, a rescue party rode out to see if any one needed help. Riding past a charred cottage, they saw what appeared to be a blackened chicken on the ground. Upon examining it, they found that it evidently had been a hen, but that it was quite dead, the head and back being burned almost to a cinder. But the bird sat in such a striking way, with her wings partly spread out, that one of the men gently flopped the hen over with his foot, and three little chicks ran out. Bravely the mother hen had covered them, in the face of the roaring fire; and bravely she had sat still in the midst of the scorching flames, choosing rather to be burned to death than that one of them should perish. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

Eventually, Jesus would indeed stretch out his arms on the cross and, like a mother hen gathering her brood under her wings, he gathered all people under the canopy of his love. He reached out to all and offered them forgiveness in exchange for their rebelliousness so that they could become right with God once again.

As I read about Jesus and his lament over Jerusalem, I begin to see that looking at Jerusalem is like looking in a mirror. I see some of the ways that you and I have rebelled against God. Like Father Abraham, we too are both faithful to the promise as we are unfaithful. Jesus called on Jerusalem to repent of their sins. He still calls on God's people to turn away from evil and turn back toward God. It's not enough to be sincerely sorry or sorrowful in our hearts and minds for the pain we have caused God and others. The church's season of Lent reminds us that true repentance is a change of heart, a change of attitude, and a change in one's actions. We are called to stop doing those things that hurt God or one another and start doing those things that help and bring healing in all of our relationships. When we repent of our sins and participate in Jesus' ministry of reconciliation, then we broaden the reach of God's canopy of love that stretches and covers the earth.

Here's a vivid example of what repentance and reconciliation can look like when set loose on the world. Columnist Bob Greene tells the story of two young men in a fraternity house. It all began with a freshman who had an odd shape. He lacked the height, broad shoulders, and the rugged face which fraternities preferred. But he really wanted to be chosen by a fraternity, so the freshman went to one rush party, and there he was invited to sit in the corner and was left there for two hours. At another fraternity party he was ushered out onto the fire escape, where he was left for an hour. In a third house he was ushered into a side room where it was clear that all the others present were also immediate rejects.

One night two seniors from one of the elite fraternities were sent to visit and offer a bid to a likely candidate, and they got the wrong room. When they entered, they found not the desired candidate, but the young man with the

odd shape. It was clear that he had been sobbing. They sat down with him. He poured out his life's rejections, and his experience in the rush process on that campus. The two seniors were moved by what they heard. They decided to do something about it. They went to each fraternity and argued for more humane treatment of all students who signed up for the rush process. They got a few snickers, but on the whole, their seriousness, and the fact that they were respected insiders, won them a hearing.

During the next round of rush parties, the student with the odd shape was treated with respect and, although he was not chosen, he received no further hurt. Shortly thereafter, the two seniors resigned from their own fraternity. Then comes the important sentence, as Bob Greene wrote it. "The two of them didn't know exactly why they were doing this. But it was the first grownup thing they had ever done, and it felt right." (Told by John W. Vannorsdall in *Lectionary Homiletics*, March 1995, p. 14)

Whether those two young fraternity men knew it or not, they had truly repented of actions that brought painful and sinful alienation. They altered course and, it not only felt right - like Abram before them - "and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness!" They became right with God.

The season of Lent offers us the opportunity to take an inventory of our lives and to repent where we sense the need. We have a change our heart, mind, and actions as we seek to cast off evil and find harmony with God, with others, and even within ourselves. And, when we sincerely repent of our sins, let us look to the cross and see the great canopy of God's love stretched over us and know that we are judged with mercy, forgiven and given a new lease on life, now and forever - to the glory of God the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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