

February 28, 2010 - The Rt. Rev. William O. Gregg [PDF] (Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35)

Interesting perspective from way up here. I am glad to be here this morning. It is my privilege and delight to make my first visitation with you. And I bring you greetings from Michael, our Diocesan, and Chip, the Assisting Bishop. And I want you to know of how grateful the three of us are to you and for you for the life and work and ministry that is done here through St. Luke's for your splendid outreach and for your commitment to love and serve the Lord. Thank you and keep up the good work.

It's interesting to be in a diocese that's tiny compared to the Diocese of Eastern Oregon physically. Eastern Oregon where I was bishop is 65,000 square miles and has 23 congregations. And so every year it was their great pleasure to see me two or three times. And in this diocese, I'm almost in my third anniversary and I'm still making first visitations and it's not nearly as far to go. But I'm glad finally to be here and to share this time of worship with you. And to thank your good clergy for their care and love of God's people in this place. Thank you, we appreciate it and are grateful to you.

It is perhaps odd to think about having a celebration of renewal and new life in Lent. After all, the great theme of Lent is sin. And the great theme of sin is all of that stuff that we've done that we shouldn't have done and all of the stuff that we didn't do that we should have done. And of course in that wonderful Jacobean phrase "And there is no health in us." Which, by the way, did not mean we were simply sickly people. It meant that there was no salvation in us. And if we look at that phrase from that perspective, we begin to see Lent as not so much something that focuses on the dark, the broken, the sinful, but rather it is an invitation by God to us in Christ through the spirit to engage in the business of how can there be health in us. God's will for us that you and I be healthy, that we be full of salvation, that we be free to be the people that God has created us to be and empowered to do the work that God calls us to do.

But God knows that when God created us, because we're created in the image and likeness of God, there's a certain level of complexity to us. And it's not in our nature simply to sally forth when God says, "Have I got an opportunity for you." Now, Abram and Sarai pretty much did that. Remember the beginning of the story that we've come into began with God saying to Abram who was 75 or so, "Have I got an opportunity for you. Pack up everything you own and all your family and you're going on a journey." "Okay," said Abram, "but where am I going?" And God's response was "Not to worry. I'll let you know when you get there." Now, the mystery in all of this is that Abram still said, "Okay."

And we enter this story at a point where Abram has reached a moment of uncertainty. A very human moment. And it has to do with being confirmed in or being assured that the promise is really real. And for Abraham that uncertainty takes place in the context of thinking about legacy. Remember Abraham is an old man. And legacy in his day was principally through a son. And Abraham and Sarah didn't have one. And Abram was confused, uncertain. And so he's bringing that to God. And he's saying, you know, "How do I know this is all going to work? How do I know?" And I think in some sense that he wasn't just standing there kind of shaking his fist at God. He was standing before God really wanting to know. "In my world, the way that I know

that I have a legacy is not something that I have. And you've made this promise to me. How do I know?" And you know, the interesting thing that's really relevant to Lent is that we see in scripture and we see here with Abram when you and I go to God and pray the prayer of our hearts, whatever that prayer is -- whatever that prayer is -- that God listens and responds. God speaks to us so that we can hear. So God said to Abram, "Go outside and look at all the stars in the sky and count them if you can. That will be the number of your descendents. And not from Eliezer. From your son." And Abram was still a bit anxious. And so God said, "Okay, here's what you do." And he listed off the animals that he needed to get and Abram knew what to do with them and Abram did what he was supposed to do. And the sun set and a deep darkness came. Abram went to sleep and in that sleep, as is so often the case with holy mystery, the holy mystery comes and speaks in a vision.

And the important thing here is that God took the time and the care to speak to Abram in ways that he would understand that the promise was true, that the promise would be fulfilled. That Abram's legacy was a promise that God intended to keep and it would come true. And Abram's belief -- God said, "Look at the sky and count the stars," and Abram believed him and God counted that as righteousness. That's not a moral quality. That's a fact of relationship that Abram came to God and spoke his heart. God answered, Abram believed and their relationship was right. They were in right relationship.

And Lent, my brothers and sisters, is about that prayer. The prayer of our heart to God. The content of our heart, whatever that may be. And Abram's example to us is that we can come to God with that prayer from that heart with faith and hope and confidence and that God is going to speak to us and care for us because God will hear us come to be with us. Through this Lent, tend to the prayer of your heart. Tend to what is there no matter what it is. Like Abraham, just say it. Sometimes it will be with words, sometimes it will be laughter, sometimes it will be with tears, sometimes we will have to depend on the spirit as Saint Paul tells us to groan within us and speak the prayer that our heart cannot speak. Come to the Lord and speak the prayer of your heart and God will hear. God will come and God will answer. That promise is true.

Another dimension of Lent is the dimension of Lent that Philippians addresses. In the spiritual tradition of the church, the imitation of Christ is a major theme. The greatest form of flattery is imitation. But for Paul it wasn't about flattery. It was about the core of who we are as Christian people. The imitation of Christ was to put Christ on spiritually in our heart and soul. And remember, in those days the heart was the center of our being. It was to live out of the fact that in baptism we die with Christ and are raised to the new life of grace in Christ. And imitating Christ for Paul was about appropriating the Godly life revealed in Christ by the spirit as our very life. It was in fact the way we become a Godly people. It was the way of the journey to the kingdom.

For us this Lent, one of the questions is, How am I putting on Christ? How am I living Christ out of my heart? How, with God's help, is my life a living proclamation of the Good News of God in Jesus Christ? How do I seek and serve Christ in all people? How do I love and serve the Lord striving for justice and peace, respecting the dignity of every human being? The God to whom we draw close and speak the prayer of our heart, who comes to us in love and empowers us for living, empowers us to live here and now. As Blessed Benedict of the sixth century, the monk said to his monastery, he said, "Folks" -- this is a paraphrase because he actually said it in Latin -- "Folks, it's about living right here, right now in this place with these people." That's what God has given us. That is where we know and see God. That is where we live faithfully and do the work that God gives us to do. Not somewhere else, but right here, right now.

Here and now among us is where we imitate Christ. Doesn't mean to be a mere copycat. Jesus did Jesus' life. That was his life. But Jesus shows to us the human capacity to live deeply, richly, fully a holy, God-centered life and it looks like the way we choose to love and serve one another. It looks like the ways in which we as parishes do our outreach. It looks like the ways in which members of our parishes serve their community on boards and in clubs and in groups. It looks like -- and I've really come to appreciate this particular illustration -- it really does look like sitting down with a child who plops this Golden Book in your lap and asks you enthusiastically to read it again. And you look it and know this will be the 5,674th time I've read this story. I don't even have to open the book. It looks like the times we take the sacrament that we have celebrated here to those who could not be with us. It looks like the meal prepared for someone who is sick. It looks like sitting gently with an aging parent. It looks like holding closely an infant and giving them comfort or food. It looks like taking the time to pass on the knowledge and wisdom of our hearts and souls to the youngsters who come after us. Of taking the time patiently to listen to the frustrated rant of an adolescent who's trying so hard not to be a little kid and so hard to be an adult and so stuck somewhere in between. It's about the kind remark to a clerk in the store. A "thank you" for their assistance. It's about doing what we can do today, tomorrow and the next day until we come to our end. Do what we can because we can. Do what we can because that is what God calls us in Christ to do. Do what we can do as the Spirit empower us to do it. Today, tomorrow, the next day.

We're going to renew our baptismal covenant shortly with those who are to be confirmed and received. We're going to commit ourselves afresh, anew, to bring the prayer of our heart to God, seek to imitate Christ, do the work that God has given us to do and will give us to do. And we're going to commit to do it together and we're going to commit to do it with God's help. Promises we have made the commitment, make ourselves available, work will get done. It will be wonderful. It will be so full of life. It will be hard, but it will be holy. We will do it in this church. We will do it because God has called us to be an Episcopal church. And Lord knows we've got our warts and imperfections. We don't always get it right. But what we do extraordinarily well with God's help, we gather week by week and we break bread and share the cup, speak the prayer of our heart. We give ourselves into the hand of God, eat the holy sacrament, go out to try again, do what we can do, the best we can to the greater glory and honor of God. Please let us give thanks this day. Amen.