

THE LIFE-GIVING WAYS OF MIGRATION

3/17/19 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA

Lent 2 (C): Genesis 15:1-12,17-18; Psalm 27; Philipians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

Did you see the Painted Ladies this week? I saw bits of them almost every day, but Thursday was tremendous! Since I was heading west, it was like driving perpendicularly into a cloud of butterflies heading north. These little, orange-brown butterflies, called Painted Ladies, are migrating from the deserts of Mexico to the Pacific Northwest. I understand that because of all the rain and the corresponding desert blooms, this is one of the biggest populations of Painted Ladies since 2008.

Nature always astounds me, but the concept of migration is completely fascinating to me. A Painted Lady, for example, only lives for about six weeks; so, the first generation will never even see the final destination; those first butterflies will travel from Mexico and only make it to somewhere in Northern California, before they've used up all their fat reserves, and have to stop to breed before dying. Then, the second generation will make the final leg to the Pacific Northwest, where there'll be more breeding.

I do understand that this is completely instinctual to Painted Ladies, but, still, when I view it from my simple human perspective, it boggles my mind that something, or someone, willingly participates in a plan that will involve their certain death. Of course, my viewpoint is challenged—stretched, I guess—when I realize that this certain death leads to the life of future generations. What these Painted Ladies do is ultimately life-giving for generations of butterflies to come!

And isn't that what Jesus did for all of humanity? In fact, his journey toward his own certain death is highlighted in this morning's Gospel reading. In the preceding chapters of Luke, the conflicts between Jesus and the powers that be have been mounting. The conflicts must have been so well-known and so far-reaching that even the Pharisees—with whom he's regularly argued with in the past—are now warning him about Herod. And, by the way, this Herod, whose threats are being brought to Jesus, doesn't even hold power in Jerusalem; Herod rules over the area of Galilee, yet, the "fox" voices his threats from afar.

Now, whether it's Jesus' humanity or his divinity that informs him, he makes clear he will not be detoured. At the same time, Jesus reveals that his very intentional route will not end well. He declares he'll continue his own path of migration, following God's call to come home...to come home to Jerusalem, the heart of power at that time. Along the way, Jesus refuses to stop doing the other things he's also called to do; his route is clear, but also includes a rigorous regime of teaching and healing as he moves along the route.

The Painted Lady is designed for the journey it makes. It can fly up to 25 miles per hour, escaping most birds that might otherwise eat it in flight. These butterflies are driven to make their way home, and, yet, home will be where they die. But as I mentioned, this promise of home, ultimately gives life to future generations, because each time a Painted Lady breeds, multiple eggs are laid, ensuring the continuation of the species.

Jesus is also specifically designed for his journey. He is the Son of God—fully human and fully divine. As he matures, he is more and more able to tap into his divine knowledge and ability, while at the same time Jesus experiences life in all its complications...just as we do—fully feeling the joy, the pain, the comfort, and the suffering.

Some of that was explored in last week's Gospel reading through Jesus' temptation by Satan—or the evil forces of the world. The voice challenges Jesus to employ his divine nature, but he doesn't comply. He doesn't comply because doing so wouldn't help anyone but himself. Jesus is designed to help humanity... to do that which is life-giving for future generations. His responses to the tempter indicates he knows in whom we find our ultimate home; our ultimate home is in God.

Some of you may have noticed that our Lenten sermon series is grounded in this idea of the "promise of home". Purposefully, Richard and I chose a combination of words: "the promise of home", that would encapsulate the multiple meanings of the phrase, and the fact that we can explore this idea from varying vantage points.

In Paul's letter to the Philippians, the apostle challenges the community to examine the promise of home from a divine perspective, rather than through earthly eyes. Like I said, choosing to willingly march toward death doesn't make sense through earthly eyes, but through a divine lens, securing the well-being of future generations makes perfect sense!

Paul also implores the people of Philippi to: "join in imitating [him] ~~me~~, and observe those who live according to the example [they] ~~you~~ have in" Paul and other leaders of the early church. We see that commitment throughout Paul's letters—to imitate the way of the cross by doing that which is life-giving for future generations.

He tells the people, for instance, that though they are no longer required to adhere to Jewish dietary laws, they shouldn't chastise others for doing so; in some settings, he instructs the women to wear head-coverings—not because he thinks that's pious, but because Paul understands this is a way to avoid persecution, and his whole focus is on multiplying the efforts of the Christian community, so that, in his words, their humiliation is transformed "into the body of Christ's glory".

Through earthly eyes, the way of the cross—Jesus walking willingly into Jerusalem, directly to his death—makes no sense. But when we remember that that sign of defeat and surrender actually leads to life everlasting—that, in the end, death does not have the final word—then our divine perspective illuminates even more powerfully that God is true to the promise of home, being ever faithful throughout all generations.

In the passage from Genesis, Sarai and Abram have a first-hand experience of that promise. As God promises a son to this barren couple, they are reminded that this isn't a sentimental gesture for them alone, rather it's for the many descendants to come. Collaborating to usher in the Kingdom of God here on earth is not just for us, but for those who come after us.

Which is where we Episcopalians differ from some Christian groups. While we believe God calls us to help the world around us in life-giving ways, some traditions teach that an individual's heavenly reward is the ultimate goal, and they're actually encouraged to speed-up the destruction of the earth, so that they might experience their heavenly journey sooner.

Some of the newer Lenten practices speak to this difference. Instead of giving up chocolate or alcohol during Lent as a practice of self-sacrifice, many Episcopalians are doing things like giving up single-use plastics, or giving up buying things that aren't really needed. Those disciplines will not only bring us closer to God, as we practice stewardship of creation, they are also life-giving actions. There are others as well, such as giving up gossip; giving up texting and driving; giving up road rage; even giving up misinformation about other religions.

The other piece of information that stands out in the story of Sarai and Abram is the presence of their doubt. Unlike the instinctual process butterflies participate in to migrate across the country, we humans have the privilege of questioning. And, yet, in Abram's doubt that God could actually do such a thing as grant them a son, we witness the deepening of faith that happens when one wrestles with the information.

Abram could have simply walked away in disbelief. Instead, he's like the man who says, "I believe; help my unbelief." Abram trusts in the faithfulness of God and so while he questions: "How am I to know?", he stays engaged. Surrendering to the way of the cross never asks us to ignore our sense of reason, rather the path of discipleship requires us to bring all of ourselves into the process.

And the promise of home is not only for all parts of ourselves, it is for all of the world. We hear that promise as Jesus sends his message out to Herod. It is a message of indignation, certainty and frustration. Jesus is essentially explaining, there's room for all of the world—even those challenging folks like Herod—in God's promise, as he cries: "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings," but he adds, "you were not willing"!

Which makes me wonder...in what ways do we refuse the comfort of God's embrace? How is it that we forget our actions affect future generations? What might we do to better demonstrate our commitment to the way of the cross? These are complex questions that will probably lead to just as complex answers. That is the way of Lent—it's like a migration of Painted Ladies; one that leads to death—that is the death of self—yet also to new life...in ourselves and for generations to come.

-AMEN

The Collect of the Day

O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy: Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ your Son; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Genesis 15:1-12,17-18

The word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." But the word of the LORD came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir." He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Then he said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess." But he said, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates."

Psalm 27

- 1 The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom then shall I fear? *
the LORD is the strength of my life;
of whom then shall I be afraid?
- 2 When evildoers came upon me to eat up my flesh, *
it was they, my foes and my adversaries, who
stumbled and fell.
- 3 Though an army should encamp against me, *
yet my heart shall not be afraid;
- 4 And though war should rise up against me, *
yet will I put my trust in him.
- 5 One thing have I asked of the LORD;
one thing I seek; *
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life;
- 6 To behold the fair beauty of the LORD *
and to seek him in his temple.

- 7 For in the day of trouble he shall keep me safe
in his shelter; *
he shall hide me in the secrecy of his dwelling
and set me high upon a rock.
- 8 Even now he lifts up my head *
above my enemies round about me.
- 9 Therefore I will offer in his dwelling an oblation
with sounds of great gladness; *
I will sing and make music to the LORD.
- 10 Hearken to my voice, O LORD, when I call; *
have mercy on me and answer me.
- 11 You speak in my heart and say, "Seek my face." *
Your face, LORD, will I seek.
- 12 Hide not your face from me, *
nor turn away your servant in displeasure.
- 13 You have been my helper;
cast me not away; *
do not forsake me, O God of my salvation.
- 14 Though my father and my mother forsake me, *
the LORD will sustain me.
- 15 Show me your way, O LORD; *
lead me on a level path, because of my enemies.
- 16 Deliver me not into the hand of my adversaries, *
for false witnesses have risen up against me,
and also those who speak malice.
- 17 What if I had not believed
that I should see the goodness of the LORD *
in the land of the living!
- 18 O tarry and await the LORD's pleasure;
be strong, and he shall comfort your heart; *
wait patiently for the LORD.

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. 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.

Luke 13:31-35

Some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." He said to them, "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. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' 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! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"