

**Introduction to the theme:**

In order to introduce the theme for today's service, I want to share a short animated video clip from Christian Aid. Some of you are aware that Liz and Tony are planning a Christian Aid fund-raising dinner on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March to help benefit and raise awareness about the urgent issue of global hunger. The information that's going to be shared in this little video is going to fly at you pretty quickly, but the main thing I want you to take away from it is that **YOU and I can** do something. **And we need to.** {View video}

<http://www.christianaid.org.uk/ActNow/if-enough-food/resources/campaign-resources.aspx>

I don't know how many of you write letters or emails to your MPs and to our other politicians, but if you don't, you should. I admit that I don't do it as often as I should—despite the fact that there are lots of organisations, including the URC, that will provide you with a template of words to use to get you started. There's so much more information about the 'Enough Food for Everyone IF' campaign on the Christian Aid website. And if you don't have access to the internet, then you should talk with me, or Liz or Tony.

One of the things I'm feeling more and more acutely is the fact that the Church is squandering the gift of its voice. *We* are squandering our voice. Mark Twain once said, "It is curious that physical courage should be so common in the world and moral courage so rare." You and I, as members of Christ's Church, need to be speaking out with greater courage and conviction about social justice issues that really matter to God: issues that may seem to inhabit far-away lands or people quite unrelated to us. But the truth is, they're much closer than we think: there are hungry families here in Wheatley. Hunger is a huge and urgent issue—one that I hope, as a congregation, we'll find a way to take some sort of action on in the next couple of weeks. But there are plenty of other social and political issues that affect real human beings, real people with stories and hopes and dreams, fears and frustrations just like you and I have.

Both of our scripture lessons this morning give us a peek into the lives of men whose lives were devoted to responding with faith and courage to God's initiative and agenda in their lives. And they beg you and me to ask whether we're doing the same.

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**“Embody the Agenda”**

**Lent 2C**

**24 February, 2013**

**Genesis 15:1-21**

**Luke 13:31-35**

**Rev'd. Tanya Stormo Rasmussen**

Do you ever question God's promises or plan in your life? Maybe sometimes quietly wonder whether there really IS a plan or over-arching purpose?

Sometimes it can be hard to know what to do with Biblical stories. We read that, time and again, the LORD God made promises to Abram—today's reading says that “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.” They were words of reassurance to the man who had just led a major military upset that had stunned and amazed the whole region. His reason for pursuing, and ultimately conquering, four kings was family honour: he had gone to rescue his nephew, Lot, who'd been taken as a prisoner of war when Sodom and Gomorrah and several other kingdoms were usurped. Abram freed Lot and a whole bunch of others, and everyone was able to return to their homes. The victory was attributed to El Elyon—(literally translated, “the Most High God”), by King Melchizadek of Salem (who was also a high priest). Abram paid tribute to El Elyon himself, making a tithe—offering a tenth of all he had.

As if his act of liberation wasn't enough, Abram refused to take any of the spoils of the military victory for himself. A hero and a gentleman.

Working backward from that military victory: Abram had also been a gentleman when he offered that same nephew whichever swathe of land he preferred when their herdsman weren't getting along and they realised they needed to go their separate ways. And he didn't balk when Lot claimed the more fertile plain of Jordan, leaving Abram and his family the more arid region in the land of Canaan. Lot knew what he was doing, because this was a land they were returning to, after having spent some time in Egypt. When in Egypt, Abram had worried that the Pharaoh or his men would have him killed in order to take his beautiful wife, Sarai, for themselves—so he lied to them and said that she was his sister. When the Pharaoh's court fell victim to a plague, Abram was found out—but allowed to live and merely sent on his way with the mystified question, “Why didn't you just tell us she was your wife?”

They had gone south to Egypt from Canaan, in order to escape the drought afflicting that region. And prior to their brief first settlement in Canaan, they had come from the land called Haran—which is where Abram's father and Lot's grandfather, Terah, had re-settled his entire family, having left Ur of the Chaldeans. It was in the land of Haran that Abram was first spoken to by the LORD. For those who have been tracing the backward trajectory in your Bibles, you'll notice that—having begun in Chapter 15 in our reading—we're now back in Genesis Chapter 12. That's where we read these famous sentences that give identity and promise to the people of Israel to this very day: “Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’”

One of the remarkable things about the story is that, despite the fact it's apparently the first time the LORD has spoken to anyone in Abram's family, Abram knows who's doing the talking. Because we're told, “So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.”

That courageous, confident, unquestioning response of obedience was credited to Abram (who eventually gets renamed Abraham) as righteousness, and it's remembered several times throughout the rest of scripture.

I doubt it's only the fact that we live in an age that demands verification for everything that makes some of us wonder how Abram knew it was God's voice . . . but it's hard not to admire him. And to wonder.

The thing I love about Abram is that he didn't *only* respond with super-human faithfulness to the events in his life. He did plenty of things that reassure us he was utterly human as well: He told that lie about his wife, for example. Frankly, I don't appreciate one bit the fact that he put Sarai's (Sarah's) life or sexual well-being at risk in order to save himself. In that moment, he was far, far from a gentleman. But I do understand that times and attitudes toward everything from

women to slaves to social classes were entirely different than what they are today, to say nothing of the way we tell stories.

Beyond that, though, Abram did have questions—he did express doubts, as we heard in our first lesson. Despite all the good things that had happened to him, Abram nonetheless wondered how or whether God could actually deliver on this promise of great reward: inheriting the land of Canaan for his own offspring—which he was now being told were going to be as numerous as the stars in the heavens. Given the fact that he and Sarai were elderly and childless (his only heir at that point was the child of a slave), you can hardly fault the guy for wanting more information—a sign of some sort, something more than *just* the voice he was hearing assuring him that it was going to happen.

And so, in one of those deep and powerful sleeps that occasionally overcome us, Abram had a dream. And in it, God gave him some more information. It wasn't all pleasant: his early offspring were going to be aliens in a land that was not their own, and they would withstand oppression and slavery for a long time. But eventually, they would be vindicated and would emerge with great wealth, in full possession of the promised land, which was expansive. Abram woke from his deep slumber to witness a divine sign as well: he saw a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch pass between the pieces of the animals he had offered up earlier to God. He also woke to a deeper understanding of divine work in the world: God's blessing comes by being willing to sacrifice; God's greater purpose is born in this sin-riddled world only by a willingness to accept the fact that there will be suffering, and sacrifice along the way.

It's understandable that Abram would accept all of the amazing promises, responding with gratitude and investing hope in the picture of this amazing future being painted for him—but with the promise of myriad progeny the old, childless man suddenly says, “Ah, okay. Hold on a second.” Good on him for asking the questions. You and I ought to ask questions, too, if a disembodied voice promises us that we're going to be wealthy and inherit a bunch of land and have progeny as numerous as the stars.

In our gospel lesson last week, we heard how Jesus was in the wilderness being tempted by the devil. Several tantalizing promises were made, even occasionally using scripture to reinforce the offer. How did Jesus know that the voice that spoke so beguilingly *wasn't* God's? Especially when he was tired and hungry—he'd been fasting for weeks, all by himself, out in the elements.

Jesus knew that this was not the voice of the life-giving God of love, because he was being invited to seek first *his own* success, power, and agenda—not God's. All of God's promises to Abram entailed Abram living into a divine plan and agenda, one that was greater than his own ability to comprehend, and encompassed people far beyond himself, but it was definite enough for Abram to be able to find a way forward into it.

Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness (time you and I are encouraged to imitate during these six weeks of Lent) focusing his heart and mind, getting clear about just whose plan and purposes he was going to embody and live out for the rest of his life. It was that discipline of self-reflection, self-denial, self-discipline that helped Jesus to become clear that serving himself, feeding

his own various hungers, was not at the heart of what God wanted or needed from him. He understood his mission, and he embraced his destiny—come what may.

Today's gospel lesson describes how undeterrable he was from doing what he knew he'd been called to do. When a group of religious leaders warned Jesus to get away from Jerusalem because Herod was hunting him with the intent to kill, Jesus was neither impressed nor daunted by their political name-dropping and obvious attempt to employ the politics of fear. "Go and tell that fox I'm busy," was his response. "I've got work to do—holy, healing work that I didn't necessarily dream up on my own, but it's part of a divine agenda that's become my sole agenda. You can try to get me out of Jerusalem, but I guarantee you that I won't be leaving before God's work through me is done there."

Next, we see Jesus looking over the city of Jerusalem in lament. He grieves over the innocent ones, as well as the ones who will persecute, reject, torture, and ultimately kill him. With extraordinary compassion, he weeps over even the unjust and the politically corrupt, just as God has done through the prophets of old, loving them and longing for their redemption in spite of their hatefulness and greed.

The final image portrays Jesus as a mother hen—a feminine image of courage and strength, spreading herself over the vulnerable young, who only think they're wise to the world. The protective mother hen is prepared to sacrifice herself, with the hope that her life will satisfy the hungry fox on the prowl enough to leave the little ones alone. Jesus knew, as he accepted *his* role in the divine agenda, that the agenda of blessing that he was helping God to fulfil in this world would not be met without suffering and sacrifice. (He also believed and trusted—he *knew*—that suffering and sacrifice would not be the final words.)

How many of us lament the political and social realities that render so much of our world broken and so many of God's people hopeless? The powerful and the disempowered are equally vulnerable to that which can kill the body, and to that which poisons the soul.

And after we've lamented, what do we do? Is it really enough just for us to feel our hearts breaking? Regrettably, that's as far as many of us—myself included—often get. It's so easy to get caught up in the activities and distractions of our daily routines and agendas, tending to those voices and habits and impulses that seem most demanding and insistent. And at the end of the day, we rehearse our regrets about the bits of God's agenda we've once again failed to tend to.

Lent is a season when we're invited to engage in special discipline, deeper self-reflection, asking ourselves who we are and whose agenda we're pursuing at the beginning and ending of each day (and several times in between). The gift of this 40-day period is an opportunity to get to know ourselves better, to get to know God's will for our lives better, to emerge from our wilderness as more focused, disciplined servants of God—individuals who, walking in the footsteps of Jesus, are not afraid to sacrifice everything in order to share the love and life of God with the world.

Do you believe that God has a plan for this world? Do you believe that God has a role for you to play in accomplishing that plan or purpose? Usually, we don't recognise it unless we look back across our lives with the idea that God might have been up to something. As Søren

Kierkegaard famously said once upon a time, “Life can only be understood backwards, but we must live forwards.”

God does have a plan and a purpose. Both our ancient and contemporary stories of faith testify to it. You and I have roles to play in that divine agenda. And if we don’t do our God-intended or divinely-hoped part, then our infinitely creative and determined God will find other ways of getting it done. But we will miss out on the blessing, joy, and deep pleasure of having participated in the ultimate goodness of God’s creation; we will miss out on the life that is truly life.

Please join with me in prayer: [**Called beyond Comfort Zone**’ by Walter Brueggemann,  
in *Prayers for Privileged People*]

We are among your called.

We have heard and answered your summons.

You have addressed us in the deep  
places of our lives.

In responsive obedience we testify,  
as we are able, to your truth as it  
concerns our common life.

We thank you for the call,  
for the burden of that call,  
for the risk that goes with it,  
for the joy of words given us  
by your growing spirit, and  
and for the newness that sometimes comes  
from our word.

We have indeed been in the counsel of your  
summoning spirit,  
and so we know some truth to speak.

But we are, as well, filled with rich  
imagination of our own,  
And our imagination is sometimes  
matched and overmatched  
by our cowardice,  
by our readiness to please,  
by our quest for well-being.

We are, on most days, a hard mix  
of true prophet and wayward voice,  
a mix of your call to justice  
and our hope for shalom.

Here we are, as we are,  
mixed but faithful,  
compromised but committed,  
anxious but devoted to you.

Use us and our gifts for  
your newness that pushes beyond  
all that we can say or imagine.  
We are grateful for words given us;  
we are more grateful for your word fleshed  
among us. Amen.