

What is Promised?

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Good Shepherd Church, 2/28/10, Lent II

Gen. 15:1-12, 17-18, Phil. 3:17-4:1, Luke 13:31-35

Last week we read of Jesus wandering in the wilderness, tempted by the devil. Today we hear of the promised land. God brings Abraham outside at night and shows him a sky full of stars. To the childless Abraham, God promises countless descendents. And God makes a solemn and rather bloody covenant to give a vast stretch of land to Abraham and his many children.

The covenant that God makes with Abraham is mysterious, violent and terrifying. What is enacted is the ancient ceremony that sealed a covenant in those days. The participants in this covenant oath actually walked between the severed halves of various animals, implying that if they broke the covenant, they themselves would experience a similar fate. God walks the path symbolically as the element of fire, making it an unbreakable covenant.¹

Given what has occurred in history since that time, one might have wished God had voiced this bloody covenant in a different, perhaps more breakable way. Or that he had said "But, Abraham, if ever in the future there arises a dispute between you and your brothers, please- don't take me so literally!"

There is another population I recently saw represented, who also longs for the promised land. Last Tuesday I went to an interfaith Immigration reform vigil at Grace Cathedral. Many faiths were represented, and each faith leader gave their blessing and reflection before we heard stories from immigrant families. A Muslim Imam quoted a poem that you might recognize:

¹ The New Oxford Annotated Bible: p. 32 (Hebrew Bible)

Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor...²

I had processed in with the other clergy in my white alb and stole, next to a rabbi in his seventies in a rumpled sports coat and yamaka. I liked him tremendously, especially as he managed to kiss his anxious-looking wife as we passed her in procession- as if to say, "Yes I am marching with the Goyim, but I love you and it's OK!" As we sat and listened to the poem being read, I noticed that he was speaking every line along with the reader. I wondered what this poem- what the experience of entering and surviving in this promised land had meant for him.

We then heard some of the victims of our present immigration laws tell their stories. There was a man who had to face the choice of visiting his dying mother in his country of origin, or staying with his pregnant wife, knowing that if he visited his mother he might never be able to be reunited with his wife and child. His mother died without the comfort of his presence.

There was a very bright young man who had to watch his classmates go on to college, while he threw away many invitations from colleges because he did not have a social security number. There was a Haitian man who experienced ship wreck and then swam the rest of the way to Florida. At the end of this heroic trip

² Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus, 1883

he had to hide out for 20 years. We have betrayed the words of the poem beneath the Statue of Liberty. And America cannot, alas, be called the mother of exiles.

Speaking of the mother of exiles, Jesus. At the time of our Gospel story, Jesus has just been immersed in teaching and healing, battling with disapproving Pharisees when he heals on the Sabbath. He has just ministered to a woman who had been bent over for 18 years. When he lays hands on her, immediately she becomes whole. Jesus raises her up, in the great tradition of God raising up the lowly. He restores her dignity, restores her as a daughter of Abraham. He then tries to explain the expansive wonder of the Kingdom of God to the disapproving leader of the synagogue. He describes the glorious hospitality of the great tree grown from the tiny mustard seed. He describes the tiny amount of yeast that causes all the bread to rise.

The fearful and fox-like treachery of Herod is the antithesis of all of Jesus' teachings. Jesus instructs the Pharisees to tell Herod that he is indeed fulfilling the mission he proclaimed at the beginning of his ministry: to bring good news to the poor, release the captives, bring sight to the blind and let the oppressed go free. But carrying all this life-giving power, he finds himself approaching the murderous city of Jerusalem.

Jesus, threatened with death, explains that he will travel three days, not to escape death, but to seek it. In the contest between a mother hen and a fox, surely the fox will always win. But Jesus, of course, has the loving quality of that mother hen, gathering her children- ALL her children into the safety of her out-stretched wings. This is a quality that defies death.

The promise land that Jesus seeks to give us in the non-violence of his new covenant, is a promised land of the heart, where all is expansive, all is forgiven,

where God will, as Jesus longs to, gather all her children as a mother hen gathers her young under her wings. This is a state without boundaries, with no bordering rivers, no sea to shining sea. It is a promised land that is not only given us, but also required of us.

Although Jesus' covenant is not a violent one, it is a very serious one- a life and death covenant, because you cannot have real life, abundant life without it. So Jesus' covenant harkens back to the ancient ones, by referring to his own flesh, his own blood. And as Jesus tells us again and again, this promised land of forgiveness, of unconditional love is available to precisely the people who feel they could never deserve it- the lost sheep, the barren, the exiles.