

*Seeing Stars*

A Sermon by Jeffrey P. Carlson

St. Pauls UCC Chicago

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Texts: Genesis 15:1-6 & Luke 13:31-35 (at end of sermon)

We are well on our way on our journey through the season of Lent. How's it going for you so far? Last week, the journey began in the wilderness. Lent always begins in the wilderness. If you think about Lent spatially, it's a journey that progresses from the wilderness to the city. In four weeks we'll arrive in the city with Jesus on Palm Sunday at the start of Holy Week. The whole season has this forward and future focus to it.

The scriptures we've been given to reflect on today are stories of two men, Abraham and Jesus, who are both looking toward their future. That's the common thread that I'd like to use as we approach these texts, and think about what they might have to say to us about facing the future. In the gospel, Jesus is journeying toward Jerusalem, toward the capital city, and he's anticipating confrontation, conflict and hostility when he gets there. And we already know what's going to happen to him, so you want to tell him, "Jesus, don't go there! Just stay in the country, stay in the villages and away from the dangerous city. Let the crowds who love you be a buffer; let them surround you and protect you. Stay with people who like you."

But Jesus is just not as conflict-avoidant as we are nor is he overly-concerned with whether or not people like him. Some Pharisees warn him that Herod is out to get him. But it doesn't faze him. It doesn't turn him aside from his ministry. He says, "Tell that old fox Herod that I'm healing people, I'm freeing people, I'm ministering to people, and I'm not going to stop. I'm going to keep on going and doing what I've been doing all along." You can definitely say that he's got focus. Jesus has been showing with his life what it looks like to live in the kingdom of God – a kingdom that's grounded in justice, in healing, in compassion, in a generous and inclusive welcome. It's about an alternative kingdom, an alternative politics, the way God would rule the world. And Jesus knows he's got to bring that message to the city. He's got to bring that message to the center of power; and that's going to be dangerous. The city won't want to hear it. It kills the prophets who are sent to it.

How do we face a future that we know is going to involve deep pain? We can try to avoid it. We can try to ignore it. We can try to run away from it. But Jesus doesn't do any of those things. He's determined to go through it, to live into the future, whatever it entails. He knows that his journey is going to take him through deep pain and conflict, but he doesn't freak out. He keeps focused on being the man that God has called him to be. Jesus knows who he is. He has integrity. He knows what his priority is: his life is centered around compassion. It's the strength of integrity bound together with

compassion that keeps him moving, that keeps him from freezing up in fear. Knowing who we are called to be and being true to our best selves is how people who are following Jesus follow him into a difficult future.

Jesus uses a metaphor to describe himself as he approaches the danger of the city. It's an animal. Out of all the animals he could have chosen, he calls himself a hen, a mother hen. You'd think he'd choose something more obviously powerful – I'm a lion, an elephant, even a horse. But instead he's approaching the city like a mother hen, who wants to shelter the chicks of that city under her wings. Isn't that nice? Jesus comparing us city folks to cute, fluffy chicks?

I'd like to digress for a moment and talk about chickens, since they've come up in our text today. I don't have a great deal of experience with chickens, but I got some when I was on sabbatical. You can learn the most unexpected things when you're on sabbatical. I spent two weeks in northern Thailand with a group called the Mekong Minority Foundation. They work with Hill Tribes, ethnic minority communities that are migrant workers who often have no protected legal status in Thailand and who tend to live on the margins of power and privilege. My first week was spent in the Chaing Rai province in a Karen village. Have you heard of the Karen? Neither had I. I met a lot of people groups that I never knew existed. The Karen have migrated to Thailand from Burma, where they are also a minority, in order to find work and to escape the totalitarian Burmese regime. I stayed with a Karen man named Boon. He had a little farm outside of town. I called it Boon's farm, and he got a kick out of that. He also got a kick when I told him that Boone's Farm is the name of a cheap wine in America.

My first night at Boon's house, his family went to bed around 8PM. And I asked what time they got up in the morning, and he said around 5 or 5:30. And I'm thinking that's really early, since they didn't go to work or school until around 9. So, not being tired at 8, I stayed up and read late into the evening until I drifted off to sleep. But at 5AM, I understood perfectly why they got up so early. There was a rooster, crowing right outside my room. At first I thought it was in bed with me. Then another began answering with his own joyful sound in the country, and then another, and another, until I could no longer count how many different roosters were even crowing. I had no idea that roosters have so many different voices. There are bass roosters and tenor roosters. I tried earplugs, but it was useless. I finally resigned myself to waking up at 5AM with everybody else and enjoy the rooster chorus.

Chickens were everywhere in the villages I visited, so I had some opportunity to observe them. There were no coops. They were all free-range. Eggs were an important source of protein, but it seemed like most of the eggs were hatching into chicks. Chicks were everywhere, in all of their fluffy cuteness, and perpetually getting under foot. They'd be running around, pecking for food, pecking at each other and competing for whatever little

morsels were around, sometimes having a tug of war with bits of food. And sometimes I'd see two chicks engaging in this stare-down. I never knew they did that before. Two chicks would stand motionless for several seconds, looking at each other beak to beak, waiting for one of them to flinch first, to show its weakness, to be a chicken. Even chicks apparently have a pecking order.

Jesus definitely knew something about the behavior of chickens. He grew up in a small village, after all, that probably wasn't too different from Boon's. So, when Jesus calls us city folks chicks, he's not just talking about our fluffy cuteness. But he just wants to take us recalcitrant chicks under his wings like a mother hen - bring us together, shelter us, protect us, keep us from running around like little chickens with our heads cut off. That's the image Jesus gives us of himself. That's how he approaches his future in the city. He's a hen, but he's no chicken. He's determined to approach the danger ahead of him in the same way as he has always lived, with integrity and with his arms stretched out in love, even toward his enemies.

God has a heart for cities and for us chickens that live in them. Cities bring together a vast and diverse group of people, looking for jobs, a better life, looking for other people who are like them. We get under each other's feet, we live on top of each other, competing for space and room and jobs. But there is also an abundance of life and potential in cities. God has a heart for cities and the people who live in them. And that's good news for our church. We're called to minister in a city, this city. This is our place. When our sanctuary burned down in the 1950's, this congregation determined not to move, but to stay here and to make our joyful sound. And God is right here with us in the city. That hen calling for her chicks is an image of God, and it's an image of the kind of community God calls us to be in our own city.

When we see Jesus as he's approaching Jerusalem, we see in him a way to live into a future that we know is going to be painful. We don't freak out. We stay steady; we stay committed to being our best selves and, like a mother hen, we keep our arms wide open in love.

Our second story is from the Older Testament, and Abraham is also thinking about the future. It's keeping him awake at night. The future has a funny way of doing that, doesn't it? It's amazing the power that the future has over us when it's not even here yet. I remember when I was a kid, the night before my parents took me to Disneyland, I couldn't sleep I was so excited. The next day, I was exhausted. I remember the night before my first on-call shift as a chaplain in a trauma hospital. I couldn't sleep I was so anxious. The next day, I was exhausted. The future isn't here, yet it invades our present life, sometimes with anticipation and sometimes with fear. Strange, isn't it, how something that's not really real can affect you so much? That's part of our humanness. We live in the past and the present and the future all at the same time.

Several years before this particular sleepless night, God had made a promise to Abraham. God said, "Abraham, I'm going to bless you. I'm going to make you a great nation. And I'm going to make you a blessing to other people. In fact, while I'm at it I'm going to bless all the nations of the earth through you." That's one big promise. God didn't hold back.

But when we meet Abraham on this particular night of anxiety, it's many years later. Abraham and his wife Sarah are old, impotent and childless. There is no way in their present condition that any child, much less a blessing for all nations, is ever going to come out of their lives. They're at a dead end, and a hopeful future seems impossible and utterly unimaginable. How do you face your future with hope, when your present life is at a dead end?

Well, you can begin by arguing with God. Abraham argues with God in the middle of the night. That's a start. That's a good way to spend a sleepless night. He tells God how hopeless his life seems and that any future of blessing is entirely unimaginable. The first thing God says to Abraham is something we hear again and again in the Bible. It's something Jesus repeatedly tells his followers. I think it's the most common command in the Bible. God says, "Don't be afraid." God knows how fearful we are. Don't be afraid, Abraham. And then God takes Abraham outside. God takes him outside of the walls of his bedroom that feel like they've been closing in around him. God takes Abe outside so he can breathe, and God tells him to look up. Look up at all of those stars shining in the darkness, Abraham. That's how your descendants will be. That's the kind of blessing you will be to the earth.

But that's it. Just a starry sky. God tells Abraham to look at the stars and believe. God doesn't give Abraham any answers. God doesn't explain how any of this future promise will happen or how an old, impotent man could ever be a father. God doesn't tell Abraham what to do. God just gives him his presence and a promise.

Whoever wrote the story of Abraham didn't know what we know about that night sky, about how small our tiny blue planet is among all the spinning galaxies of space. When we're out in the wilderness, away from the city lights, we know that we are gazing out into an unimaginably vast universe. It blows your mind. It puts our little lives into perspective. When we look up at the night sky we might see a cold and endless emptiness. We also might see the possibility of "strange new worlds, new life and new civilizations." A starry sky speaks simultaneously of both vast emptiness and enormous, mysterious possibility.

This is a paradox in our faith. Where God seems most absent, God is also most present. Where God is most absent, God is also most present. It's a paradox that you find throughout the stories of people who lived faithfully. I was thinking about Mother

Theresa, whom God used for so much good among the poor of Calcutta, speaking of a dark night in her own soul. When we read the story of Jesus journeying toward Jerusalem, it's tempting to only read it from the perspective of Easter: we believe that God was with Jesus as he journeyed toward the pain ahead. And yet when Jesus talks about the future that awaits him, he says nothing at all about God. Did you notice that in today's gospel reading? Jesus says nothing at all about God. It's not at all clear that he feels some warm, comforting presence of God with him. He just says that he's committed to integrity and doing what he has always felt called to do, and he will do it in love. During Holy Week we'll see him struggling through his own sleepless night in prayer, struggling with God over what's ahead of him. And we finally see him die like a mother hen, with her wings outstretched in embrace. The cross is a symbol of God's deep presence but also God's deep absence. It's a paradox, a mystery that doesn't give a clear-cut answer but that reveals something deeply true about God's relation to us. Our journey of faith goes through periods of great joy and exuberance but we also pass through periods where God seems utterly absent and our faith can only be expressed by choosing to remain faithful, come what may.

When God showed Abraham that starry sky, God didn't give him any clear answers about the way ahead or what his future would entail. Abraham could only believe and trust that God would be true to the promise and bring those stars to life. And God did bring those stars to life. You and I are those stars. We're the descendants he was promised. We are the future he could never imagine. God has been faithful in the past and will be faithful in our own future. We are always on a journey, a journey into a future that is open, that is full of questions and uncertainty, but a future that is also full of promise. We never arrive in the future. We're always becoming, always becoming the people God is calling us to be, while the future remains with God.

Genesis 15:1-6: 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." God 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 Abram believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

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.'"