

GENESIS 15: 1-12, 17-18 (p. 11)

MARCH 13, 2022

LUKE 13: 31-35 (p. 847)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

We pray for Insight Lord, and for Illumination. We ask for Wisdom, and Knowledge, and Understanding. We pray that you will open our hearts to your Amazing Love, and our minds to your Profound Truth. And we ask for a glimpse of you Lord, as we humbly search your Word. We do this Prayerfully Father, and in Jesus's Name, Amen!

"GOD REALLY DOES CARE"

I want to share a few excerpts from a Love Story this morning. It's not a Novel though, or a vignette. It's an honest-to-goodness Love Story. One based on actual events. It unfolds over historically documented moments in time. The Characters are all mentioned by name. The names are not changed to protect the innocent, or for that matter, the guilty. We see "who they are", and "what they think". We're even told "how they feel"!

And as with any good Love Story, the "Players" are introduced, and then developed further, through interaction with other "Players". Everything takes place in real-life situations. We see excitement and drama, joy and disappointment! Crises appear, and are then resolved. More character development unfolds. More excitement and drama! More joy! More disappointment! And the point of this Love Story, as in any Love Story, is "Love Wins"! That's abundantly clear on every page! This isn't a Fairy Tale. It doesn't begin with "Once Upon a Time"! It's a Love Story, one with Cosmic Dimensions and Eternal Ramifications! So, it starts, "In the Beginning"! Maybe you've read it?

“In the beginning, God”! And that’s really the point, right from the start, God! “In the beginning the Spirit of God hovered over the waters”, we’re told in the first few verses of Genesis. And with just a “Word” God created all that there is! That “Word” later became flesh and dwelt among us”! That “Word”, “was with God” in the beginning, and “was God”! And “through Him, all things were made”, it says in the first few verses of John! In the beginning, God”! All throughout the Book, God! And if you jump ahead to the end, you see God! God is the Central Character, the focus of this Love Story!

Out of the formless, empty darkness of “absolute-nothing”, God made everything, and saw that it was good! He created light and dry land, plants and animals, stars and planets and such! He created the Heavens and the earth, “in all of their vast array”, we’re told! But something was missing. The stage wasn’t completely set. So, God created us. “Man, and Women”, it says, “In His own image”. It wasn’t “good” without us! You see, it really is a Love Story! So, how does that make you feel?

God loved us, right from the beginning! He wanted us around, right from the beginning! He even set us up in what can only be describes as Paradise! God gave us food to eat, and rules to live by. God even walked with us in the “cool of the day”. We had a relationship, a Covenant relationship, a Marriage if you will! But rather quickly, we lost focus and became quite selfish. We started thinking we were God, and began to rebel. Maybe you’ve heard all this before? The Book has been around for a while. Maybe you even know how it ends! And maybe, just maybe, that has shaped who you are?

Did you know that everyone has a Worldview? It's true, whether they know it or not. We all have a core set of beliefs through which we see the world. It's our Frame of Reference, if you will, the way we discern what's true and what's not. To use a fancy, eleven-dollar Seminary word—it's our Hermeneutic, the lens through which we see things! And this lens, this intellectual and emotional lens, sort of edges our reality, giving it definition and shape!

Everyone has a Theology too. Again, whether they know it or not—whether they want to admit it or not—a basic set of assumptions about God! Think about it. Even an Atheist, someone who says “there is no God”, can only do that, based on their assumptions about God! These assumptions can change, of course. Our Worldview and Theology will most likely mature, as new knowledge is acquired, and new experiences are lived. But at any moment in time, we all have these base assumptions.

So, the question then, is never, “Do you believe in God”! I mean, why would an Atheist argue so vehemently about something they don't believe in? No, the question is not, “Do you believe in God”, but rather, “What do you believe about God”! And from the very beginning, if you just look, it's pretty clear that God cares! And that the relationship that He desires, between Him and His people, is actually a Love Story!

“We are God's Chosen People,” is says in 1 Peter “a Royal Priesthood, a Holy Nation, a People Belonging to God! We are the Elect, those who God “foreknew”, it says often in Scripture! We are God's Beloved, those who are special in His eyes!

The people in Jerusalem, who Jesus is addressing today, would have had that Worldview, that Theology. God loves us! We're His people! He chose us! He saved us from captivity! He has our best interest in mind! In fact, God loves us, so much so that He has taken up residence among us! The Lord Tabernacles with us, right here in our midst, in this very city, right here in the Great Temple of Jerusalem! God loves us!

So, think from their perspective. Or think from ours, because it's really the same. Moses, our forefather, was sent by God to lead our people out of slavery and bondage in Egypt. The Lord Himself guided us through the wilderness, and right into the Promised Land, just as He promised. Yahweh made a Pledge, a Covenant Promise to our ancestor Abraham to make him into a great nation, and establish him in his own land, which He did! And then, each time that we were separated, He brought us back again.

God is faithful you know, loving and just. He keeps His promises. We are a Covenant People, and we have a Covenant Relationship with the Almighty. The Ark of the Covenant in the Lord's Temple is a visual sign of that Promise. We are the Lord's Beloved. He really does care for us. We are connected, you see, bonded, joined in love! That's not just Good News, that's Great News, right!

And as Christians, we know that we are "The Bride of Christ"! We have an intimate, loving relationship with Jesus. We too have made a Covenant Promise. We too are God's Beloved!

So, why do you think we are such a rebellious lot, an adulterous people who break our Covenant Promise time and again? Why are we so often selfish harlots, who constantly run off in search for other lovers? That may sound a bit harsh! I get it! But it's true! So, how do you feel now, about our Love Story?

That's the context into which Jesus cries, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the Prophets and stone those sent to you. How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" God really does care! Clearly! But His Beloved, you and me, have been anything but faithful! That's the sad, very clear message of Lent!

You can probably see why I say the Bible as a Love Story. From the very beginning, all the way to then very end! It's a history of God's interaction with His people, which demonstrates, clearly, the character of the players! Only what we see, repeatedly, is a one-sided Love Story, one that actually includes all of the gritty drama we would just as soon hide!

What I mean is, God created us to be in relationship with Him. He then placed us in Eden, and gave us everything we could ever need, walked with us, established rules to keep us safe! But even before the Honeymoon was over, we were unfaithful. We went looking for other lovers, particularly ourselves. We searched out other places to shower our affections, and selfishly found them in ourselves. But God still loved us! He still cared! It's hard to believe, but it's true!

He even cared enough to make clothes for Adam and Eve, before banishing them from His Presence. And that's just how the Love Story begins! As young adults, we continued to reject our Betrothed, and God implemented "Tough Love". We grew even worse, and eventually He gave us a major "Time Out". The Lord wiped out the entire world with a Flood! Washed it clean! Ready to start over! And yet He still cared enough to save a remnant of people to be in relationship again! We, of course, scorned His advances! We even built a huge tower to our own Narcissism, at Babel, a monument to ourselves! We became so complacent and so self-serving in our Covenant Relationship that our Beloved had to scatter us from His sight! And that's just the first eleven chapters of the romance. Then the cycle continued.

Can you believe it? Can you imagine how disgusted God must be with us, how much hurt He must feel? And yet, He continues to love us anyway, regardless, continues to care! This isn't a Harlequin Romance, is it, some fantasy, where everything is all warm and fuzzy! It's a true story of love, a history of God's interaction with His Bride, one that includes all of the tough times, all the disfunction!

It's not always pretty! Which to me, makes it all the more believable! It witnesses to all of the work involved, and all of the patience it takes, and all of the failure that so often happens in a true relationship! It's like a marriage, or a parent/child relationship, or the bond between two very dear friends. At times you don't listen as well as you should! At times selfishness creeps in, or unfaithfulness, or rebellion, or betrayal even! And at times the hurts go very deep indeed!

And yet the Love continues. The Lord has wrapped our entire relationship with an overwhelming, self-giving, self-sacrificing love. And hopefully, realizing this, we will change our Hermeneutic, our Worldview, our Theology even, and want to do better in the future! Maybe, we'll even start to take our Wedding Vows more seriously!

Today, in our first reading, we find ourselves at a Covenant Renewal Ceremony, between the Lord and His Beloved. It's a Wedding if you will, or more accurately, a Wedding Vow Renewal. We are actually right where we need to be! And we hear in the text some of the Pledges of Loyalty and Vows of Faithfulness, that we, as God's Beloved, make ourselves!

Covenants are powerful things! And binding! Covenants are not "if/then" business agreements though! "If you do such-and-such, then I'll do such-and-such". No, they are life-long, forever, promises! Promises unto death! I will do "A, B, and C"! And if I don't, may God strike me dead! The second person, or group, then promises, unto death, to do "X, Y, and Z"! And if I/we don't, may God strike us dead!

It is love that makes the promise, and love that binds it! And it is death that is the result when a Covenant is broken! That's the image in the ritual mentioned today, of cutting animals in half and then walking between the pieces. We see it Jeremiah 34, verse 18 and following. And we see it here, in God's Covenant renewal, with a smoking firepot and a blazing torch. God Himself promises to be faithful, even unto death! And we are those He makes that promise too, His Dearly Beloved! So, how do you feel now?

The actual Covenant took place back in Genesis Twelve, where Almighty God says, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household, and go to the land I will show you”. Obey me, says the Lord. Have faith in me. Trust me. “I will make you into a Great Nation and I will Bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a Blessing. I will Bless those who Bless you, and Curse those who Curse you; and all people on earth will be Blessed through you”. I will make you into a Great Nation. I will give you the land where you now live as an everlasting possession. I will be your God. And you, and your descendants after you, will be my people. Walk blameless before me and keep my Covenant Commands! And this Promise, we are told, is an “Everlasting Bond” for Abram, and all of his descendants!

Abram was seventy-five years old, by the way, when God made that Covenant Promise. He left his home in Haran, and headed out in faith to the Promised Land, into the arms of God, his Beloved! Things weren’t always rosy in those first few years of marriage. In fact, more than a few hardships materialized along the way! There was a time of famine that threatened to kill the entire family! There were some harsh words with relatives, and issues with the neighbors! There was a major conflict with Abram’s nephew Lot! And Pharaoh, the King of Egypt, “the ruler over all that the eye could see”, took Abram’s wife Sarai into his personal harem!

I’m sure there were doubts along the way, don’t you think? I’ll bet there were times when Abram thought about turning around and heading back home! He didn’t though. He kept the Faith.

For twenty-four years Abram clung to the Covenant Promise that his offspring would be as numerous as the stars, even though he and Sarai didn't have a child. Until finally, when he was one hundred years old, and his wife, well past child-bearing at ninety, were Blessed with Isaac, establishing the family of God. That's Faith, don't you think? And faithfulness! And Scripture says God credited it to him as righteousness! You see, it really is a Love Story!

The romance continued, of course, for thousands of years in fact. All through the Old Testament, and right up to the New. And the cycle of rebellion continued as well. The Prophets, caring uncles and aunts let's say, time and again pointed out the family shame. They were sent by our Dearly Beloved to call us back from our sinful, rebellious ways. And each time that we returned, forgiveness was there waiting for us.

Uncle Isaiah speaks of "Woes and Judgments", and "The Lord's Anger", "but also of "Deliverance" and "Redemption" when we repent! Uncle Jeremiah talks about how "Israel has Forsaken God", of the "Broken Covenant", but also of "Restoration" when we return! Uncle Ezekiel tells of, "God's Glory Departing the Temple", of "Judgment" and "Rebellion". But he too declares restoration when the People of God repent. Joel speaks of "Rending our Hearts", and Amos "Calls us to Repentance"! Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah—Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah—Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi all warn us of "Judgment"! And yet each one promises "Redemption" too, and "Forgiveness", if we just stop our selfish rebellion!

We've been warned, time and again, called to come back home. But again and again, we killed the messengers, and just went on with our willful ways! Jeremiah, knowing God's plan, on the eve of the nation of Israel's destruction, goes out and buys a field as a visual reminder of God's faithfulness to His Covenant Promise, as a sign that God really does still care! And Hosea, per God's command, as an allegory, a visual statement of our rebellion, marries an adulterous wife, and raises unfaithful children, "to show", declares the Lord, that "the people are guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the Lord"!

You can see why Jesus weeps, can't you, as He stands on the edge of the Capital City of that same Promised Land? And you can actually feel His lament as He talks to the Pharisees—the devout religious leaders of Israel—those charged with seeing that the Covenant Promise is kept! He is practically crushed, filled with such sorrow, as He looks at the sin and rebellion of His Beloved, staring Him in the face! We've been unfaithful! We've broken our Covenant Vows! We've turned away from our Beloved! But is that how you want the Love Story to end?

"Whatever faith you have," says Thomas Long, a well-known Preacher, "is there because somebody overcame their reluctance and took the time to speak to you about God. Somebody walked into a Sunday school class, or climbed into a pulpit, or dropped by your dorm room, or sat with you beside the lake at camp, or held onto you during a really bad time, and talked, maybe stammered, but talked nonetheless, to you about God."

Think about that. God not only loves you, but He cares enough to put people in your life to call you back to the Throne of Grace! He gives you churches where you can learn and grow, and seasons such as Lent, so that you might do just that!

So here is the thing. Our question to ourselves, today and always. What idols, what false gods am I running off with? Money? Power? Prestige? Self-gratification? Momentary Thrills? How have I selfishly abandoned my Beloved—doing what I please on the Sabbath—ignoring His Love Letters here in the Family Diary? Are my desires, what I want, or think I need, the focus of my Worship? How about the focus of my prayers? How have I, secretly, or openly, rebelled against my God? What have I allowed to entice me away? How have I broken my Covenant Vows to my Beloved?

“How I long to gather you together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings”, says Jesus our Lord! “But you were not willing!” “Even now,” declares the Lord, through the Prophet Joel, “return to me with all of your heart. Rend your hearts and not just your garments. Return to the Lord your God—your Beloved—for He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in love.”

It’s still a Love Story, isn’t it? Don’t ever forget that. God really does care. Enough, in fact, to go to the Cross on your behalf! It’s an honest-to-goodness Love Story, waiting for the final chapter to be opened, complete restoration with our Beloved! So, how will you respond to the loving advances of your God? To the open arms of the Almighty? And all of God’s people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Almighty God, loving Lord, the One who cares more than we will ever know, and whose faithfulness is beyond measure or compare—call us back, please, from all the places we have wandered off to. Forgive us, Lord, for our rebellion. Remember not our stubbornness and selfishness. Un-harden our hearts Lord, please, so that we will turn again to you. Whisper to us now, and during this season of Lent, so that we will repent and be healed. Draw us to the Cross.

Father, our journey this past week has brought some happiness into our lives, and some laughter as well. But it has brought some hardships too, and troubles and pain. We thank you for your Presence in the midst of all of these! And we thank you in advance for your continued Presence in the days and weeks ahead. We thank you for your abounding love Lord, as well, to all who are in need. We are witnesses to your abundant Grace! We have seen your Smiling Face! And so, with confidence, and in faith, we come before you now in prayer.

We lift up before you Lord all of the Blessings that continue to shower upon us, especially those we don't take the time to see. And we lift up this Church, a powerful Blessing in our lives. We lift up and all those on our prayer list, and all those silently in our hearts. And we ask you Lord to heal the hurts, and to be powerfully present in the pain, and to celebrate alongside those in their joy.

We pray for this troubled world as well, Father. Wars and famines, injustice and persecution, hatred and crime and un-forgiveness seem to be everywhere! Apathy abounds, and courtesy and compassion seem to wane! We need your Presence, Lord, and we need it now! And so together, we pray as we were taught, saying, Our Father...