

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

M: Service of Leave-Taking

Genesis 12:1-9, Psalm 62:1-2, 5-8, 11-12, Revelation 21:1-4, 22-26, 5-7, John 15:1-11

**14 April 2024
Salem, Bridgeport**

“Priceless Gifts from Me to You”

I know that after church many of you take your bulletin and throw it into the recycling bin,
but I hope you don't do that with this one, because there is a gift in it for each one of you.

You know that in our liturgical tradition we normally follow a three-year lectionary
which has four lessons assigned for each Sunday,
but in non-liturgical traditions, pastors choose their own texts.
In my work bridging denominations, I often find myself explaining
how the Holy Spirit is able to work within both systems,
and that each has its strengths and weaknesses.

There's actually a lot of freedom within the liturgical tradition
since we have 4 readings from which to choose
and for half the year, there are an additional 2 semi-continuous readings.
And then add to those, the 4-year narrative lectionary with its 2 readings per/week
and you've got a total of 8 readings from which to choose.
So almost always, I discern in 1 of those lessons at least, the message God would have me bring to you.

But on special occasions like this leave-taking service,
a whole list of possible readings are given as suggestions.
So this is one of the rare occasions when the pastor gets to choose the readings for the day.
And I have chosen these 4 especially for you.
Think of it this way: God's Word is like the biggest jewelry store in all the world,
and I got to go shopping in it and select gems to give to you!

The first reading from Genesis 12 has always been a favorite of mine, & the older I get, the more I appreciate it.
I've referred to it often over my years here at Salem, but it's probably never been more relevant than it is today.
*“¹Now the LORD said to Abram,
“Go from your country & your kindred & your father's house to the land that I will show you.
²I will make of you a great nation, & I will bless you, & make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.”*

And today the Lord says to you, “Go from this place of 3160 Park Avenue in Bridgeport
and from your Salem family, and – for some of you, from the place your parents worshiped –
to a place I will show you. I will bless you so that you will be a blessing.”

The reading continues, *“⁴So Abram went, as the LORD had told him ... Abram was seventy-five.*

I can only imagine how difficult this is
for those of you who have been here for decades or for all of your lives.
I think you know that I never wanted this day to happen.
I wanted everyone who wanted to stay here to be able to stay here;
I didn't want any one of you to be forced to leave. I believe that's what God wanted.

But whatever God wanted or didn't want, God allowed the decision to be made to close,
and so each and every one of you finds yourself in the position of Abram,
having been called to leave your home,
at a time in many of your lives when adventure may be the last thing you are looking for.

And now God calls each of us from this place to a new place
and God promises to bless us so that we can be a blessing.

That doesn't mean it's easy.
Last week I spoke about the painful process of grief.
It's never easy to lose people and things that we love.
And it's especially painful when we feel we have been let down or betrayed.

I know what that's like.
In the last few months,

I have experience betrayal in three different organizations and one personal relationship. People who had my complete trust have let me down.
One of those betrayals by itself would have been devastating.
To have four come at once has driven me to the brink of despair.

But here's the thing: to think that we can totally trust in other people or an organization or in our health or in our financial well-being or in anything else is a delusion, since the only thing in which we can truly trust is God and God alone.

The psalmist writes, "*1For God alone my soul waits in silence...*"

Always before I've read that as if it were saying, "my soul waits in silence for God alone", but this week, having been let down by so many people, and feeling totally abandoned, I read it differently –
not, "my soul waits and silence ... for God alone",
but "alone, my soul waits in silence".
"Alone. Alone. My soul waits...& waits...& waits...in silence...for God."

Abraham took his wife and his nephew and his family and household with him, and some of you will go together to a new place, but I know that others of you are feeling very much alone in this transition.

So this psalm is for you.

You may feel like you are waiting alone and in silence for God to show up, but from God **will** come your salvation.
You may feel like you are waiting alone and in silence for God to show up, but you **can** put your hope in him.

The psalmist continues,
"*5He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken.*"
If we build our life on anyone or anything else, we are building it on sand, but if we build it on God, we are building it on solid rock.

Again, the psalmist continues,
"*6God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.*"
When we build our life on God,
then God is our rock and our salvation and our fortress and nothing can shake us.
When we build our life on God,
then God will be our refuge & God will deliver us, & God will bring us honor.

The psalmist continues, "*7Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us....*"
No matter how alone or abandoned or betrayed or hurt or scared you may feel, pour out your heart before God and know that you can trust in God at all times.

Our first reading was from the first book of the Bible and our third lesson is from the last, and both readings are about God doing a *new* thing.

In Genesis 12, God was leading Abram

to a new place, into a new promise, into a new family, into a new blessing, into a new legacy. And here in Revelation 21, we are again reminded that

the God of creation is always creating and always making all things new!

*“¹Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth;
for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away...”*

The writer continues,

“²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God...”

And isn't that what we pray every time we pray the Lord's prayer?

“Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as in heaven!”

When we pray that, we are praying to pull heaven down to earth, which means we're praying for something *new*!

So if we don't want something new, perhaps we should stop praying that prayer!

The writer of revelation continues *“³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,*

‘See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them;

⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death ...& mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.’”

The first things have passed away, but what is coming is *better*! God himself will be here!

and God will wipe away every tear & there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain!

Yes, the old has passed away, but the new promises to be better!

And here's the special gift in this reading for each of you,

“²²I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.”

Old Testament Judaism was tied to the temple, and so when the temple was destroyed,

Judaism had to be completely reinvented or it would have died, too.

And marvelously, it was reinvented in a way that allowed it to spread throughout the world, since it was no longer tied to one geographic place.

Sometimes we tend to conflate separate things into one –

sometimes we conflate church and state, sometimes we conflate theology and culture,

sometimes we conflate Lutheranism with northern European culture (either German or Scandinavian),

and sometimes we conflate what happens in a place with the place itself.

Your faith is not tied to 3160 Park Avenue in Bridgeport, nor is it tied even to Salem Lutheran Church.

Your growth in faith, your journey in faith, may have happened in this place and among the people of Salem, but your faith is not dependent upon either.

Your faith is in the Lord God Almighty, or as the writer of Revelation puts it, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

Your faith goes with you wherever you go.

And if you are afraid it won't, then I give you our last reading for today from John 15.

Jesus says,

“¹I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower.

²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit.

Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit....

*Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine,
neither can you unless you abide in me.*

⁵I am the vine, you are the branches.

Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

*⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers;
such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.*

⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”

I believe these words of Jesus.

And the way I interpret these words is that when a person or a congregation is connected to the vine that person or that congregation will have life and have it abundantly and that person or that congregation will grow and bear fruit.

That person or that congregation will not even have to try; it will be automatic.

And I also believe that if a person is dying spiritually or a congregation is dying, it means that that person or that congregation is *not* connected to the vine.

Congregations and denominations *are* dying, but it doesn't mean they have to.

And if any one of you feels that you are dying spiritually, know that there is an easy answer.

All you have to do is reconnect to God

through praise and prayer and the study of God's word, both individually and in community.

That's one of the amazing gifts that Jeanette Harris has passed on to me and that I pass on to you.

I was never much of a one for prayer.

Reading the prayers on Sunday morning were usually all I needed, unless something happened, and I was forced to turn to God.

But when the pandemic started, Jeanette invited me to pray weekly with her on zoom.

Four years later that Wednesday prayer group continues.

Three years ago she invited me to join in a 6:30 AM prayer group.

It took me a year to agree to join and I only joined temporarily for the month of January.

Two years later and I'm still calling in to that prayer line most days.

Pastor Johnson's church has prayer at six, noon, and six

every day during January and on the first three days of the other months.

I call into that prayer line when I can.

A year ago I felt led to offer prayer at noon Monday through Friday on a conference line.

I only intended it as a Lenten discipline, but over a year later it continues.

Then Pastor Gabrielle invited me to a weekly zoom meeting on Tuesday afternoons

to pray for economic justice in Bridgeport & around the world & I joined that prayer group.

And then our synod's Anti-Racism Advisory Board decided to undergird our efforts with prayer and we now offer a zoom gathering on the first Monday and third Thursday of every month.

As far as Bible study goes, I've attended the Lutheran pastors' text study on Tuesday mornings for as long as I've been at Salem.

And then Jeanette Harris invited me to join her for a Wednesday night gathering on zoom which has continued for probably three or more years.

And then there's also Rip Hoffman's Bible study that I go to many Tuesday evenings.

Gathering with people to pray and to study God's word has changed my life,

and the signs and wonders and miracles I have experienced are worth more than anything else in my life.

So this is the reading, the gift, the gem I offer to you as a challenge:

Whatever you do and wherever you go from here, I encourage you to pray more and study God's word more because that's how we grow in our faith

and in our relationship with the God of boundless power and endless love.

God calls us as God called Abram to leave this place and our Salem kindred,

and journey to a place that God will show us

and God will bless us so that we may be a blessing to others.

As we leave this place, we may feel alone, but we are not –

for God, our rock and our salvation and our fortress and our honor and our refuge is with us.

As we leave this place, we experience the grief of loss,

but we can trust in the One who is seated on the throne, who says, "See, I am making all things new!"

Also, he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true!"

And as we leave this place, I urge you to reconnect or to strengthen your connection with Jesus

because in him you will find life and life abundant.

Of that I am sure ...

for Christ is risen! **Christ is risen indeed!** Alleluia! **Amen!**