

Sermon Notes from the Church’s Ministry Among Jewish People
Second Sunday in Lent – Year C

RCL Readings – Genesis 15:1–12, 17–18; Psalm 27; Philippians 3:17–4:1; Luke 13:31–35

ACNA Readings – Genesis 15:1–18; Psalm 27; Philippians 3:17–4:1; Luke 13:31–35

Introduction. We linger in Lent, with the daylight hours lengthening and sure promises of spring and Easter emerging everywhere. In keeping with our Lord’s 40 days of fasting, the Christian calendar follows a period of penitence and fasting in preparation for Easter. The Jewish calendar also devotes a period to penitence and fasting (late summer to early fall/autumn) during which they recite Psalm 27, one of our readings today. Just in passing, the Jewish calendar has two holy days of note this week. The Fast of Esther is from dawn to sunset on Wednesday, March 16, 2022, followed by the Feast of Purim beginning at sunset on March 16, when observers celebrate the Jewish people’s salvation from wicked Haman during the rulership of Ahasuerus of Persian.

Common Theme. This week’s readings focus our attention on the importance of faith in our penitential journey. In every generation, there are two kinds of people in the world, those who are faithless, unrighteous, earthly-minded, and oppressors, and those who trust in the Lord and live uprightly, heavenly-minded because they know their real citizenship is in heaven. Which kind of people will we imitate in our generation?

Genesis 15:1–18. After Abram’s victory over the confederation of kings in Genesis 14 and the restoration of his nephew Lot and his family and all his possessions, Abram was blessed by Melchizedec, King of Salem, priest of the Most High God, affirming that the dramatic deliverance was because of the blessing of the Most High God and not because of Abram’s power. After this, God’s word comes to him afresh. The reading divides into two: verses 1–6 about God’s promise of a son and heir for Abram, and verses 7–21 about God’s covenantal pledge of future redemption for the nation and a promise of a land. Abram raises questions of doubt in each section, and God affirms the promises fulsomely!

Verse 1, “The word of the Lord comes to Abram in a vision,” just like the prophets later, as Abram too was a prophet in his generation (Gen 20:7). The Lord backs up Melchizedec’s message with a promise—Abram does not need to fear attacks from any number of aggressors, as the Lord is his shield and reward! The word for *shield* here is from the verb used by Melchizedec (14:20) when he praised the Most High God who *delivered* Abram’s enemies into his hand. And the pronoun is emphatic: “*I* (am) a shield for you.” Some then translate the next phrase as “your reward will be very great” (e.g., NASB, NRSV), taking the statement as an independent clause, but the evidence from elsewhere¹ suggests “great abundance” or “very great” is modifying the noun “your reward,” in apposition to “a shield for you.” So the Lord is saying: “*I* am a shield for you and your reward in great abundance.” What a stunning promise against fear—God our shield and our very great reward!

Verse 2. Up to this point in Genesis, Abram has only been silent in response to the Lord’s speeches, so this is the first record of him actually responding. Robert Alter says it “reveals a hitherto un-glimpsed human dimension of Abram.”² Abram starts: “O, Sovereign Lord”, which is an English

¹ NET Bible, Genesis 15, note 2.

² Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, (London: W.W. Norton, 2019).

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translation of the Hebrew, “Adonai YHWH.” The tetragrammaton (YHWH) is usually written in the Tanakh with the vowels like Adonai (to avoid readers pronouncing the divine name), but in this verse (and v. 8), it would lead to a repetition of Adonai, so here the tetragrammaton is pointed instead with the vowels for the word Elohim (God), which produces the reading “Master, God,” in the Jewish textual tradition. Also, Abram’s response continues with an emphatic personal pronoun, parallel with the Lord’s: “since *I* (am) going childless.” The participle for going/walking here could suggest Abram’s personal anguish about continuing to walk around in life childless. The Lord is promising *I* am your shield and abundant reward, but Abram says in fact *I* am walking about childless! Or the context suggests “going” could be a euphemism for “going to my end,” so meaning: “I am dying without any children.” The childlessness reminds us of the opening part of Abram’s story, regarding Sarai’s infertility (11:30).

The next sentence appears to have an intentional word-play in the Hebrew, literally: “The son of the acquisition (*ben-mesheq*) of my house is Eliezer of Damascus (*dam-meseq*).” The sound-play is in keeping with the belief that “the omen is in the nomen.” Damascus may mean “a well-watered land,” so Abram seems to be saying: I continue to go around childless and so Eliezer my steward will fulfil his name and become a well-watered land, as the inheritor of all my wealth! Verse 3 drives it home boldly with more alliteration in the original: literally, “Look, to me you have not given seed, and look, a son of my house is inheriting me.” The argument is “since ... then.” But the narrator in verse 4 mirrors Abram’s “Look,” with the word of the Lord coming to him in direct response. “Look, the Lord said: ‘This one will not inherit you.’” Notice, the Lord does not use the steward’s name, as he refuses to give the name any authority or significance as a well-watered land! Instead, the Lord says, “the one who comes out from your body (literally, belly/womb), *he* (emphatic) will inherit you,” emphasizing for the first time Abram’s biological propagation. Abram had sceptically argued that the Lord had given him no seed, but the Lord shows him the stars of heaven and says “*so* shall be your seed.” In 13:16 the offspring is compared to the “dust of the earth,” but here to the “stars of the heaven,” with a grand visual display of the heavenly hosts! In 22:17 and 32, the seed is also likened to “the sand on the seashore.” Do these metaphors suggest an earthly and a heavenly seed coming from Abram?

Verse 6 in the Hebrew does not follow in a sequence but stops the reader short, to consider Abram’s response to God’s promise. Abram trusted the Lord. The verb used here (from which we get “amen” = it is true, sure) and the form of the verb³ means “to consider something reliable or dependable.” Abram regarded the Lord who made this promise as reliable and fully capable of making it a reality.

And because of this, the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness. Firstly, what is the pronoun “it” (feminine in Hebrew) referring to here? There are two possibilities: firstly, it could be referring *back* to Abram’s act of faith—Abram trusted the Lord and the Lord reckoned it, *his act of faith*, as righteousness. Secondly, it could be referring *forward* to the feminine noun “righteousness,” so meaning “and the Lord reckoned it to him, [namely] righteousness.”⁴ The use of “reckoned” and “righteousness” only occur together here and in Psalm 106:31. It says there that Phinehas’ actions in

³ NET Bible. Genesis 15, note 20

⁴ NET Bible. Genesis 15, note 22.

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Numbers 25 were credited to him for righteousness. In that context, the use of “for” before righteousness makes the meaning explicit, but here in this context it is omitted, so here the LORD “reckoned it to him, righteousness.” In both contexts the word “righteousness” (*tzedakah*) seems to carry the meaning of “loyal, rewardable behaviour,” and in comparable inscriptions, related words mean “correct, justifiable conduct.”⁵ An ancient Jewish *midrash* (commentary) on this verse says: “And thus do you find that our father Abraham inherited this world and the world to come only in the merit of his believing in the L-rd. As it is written (in this connection, Gen 15:6), ‘And he believed in the L-rd, and it was accounted unto him as *tzedakah*.’⁶ So faith here and in the Tanakh generally means “trusting profoundly in a person ... the personal God who has reiterated his promise.”⁷

From verse 7, there are two scenes: the night sky scene and the sunset-covenant scene. “In the first, God grandly promises and Abram trusts; in the second, the two enter into a mutually binding pact, cast in terms of a legal ritual. Alter says:

In the first scene, progeny is promised; in the second the possession of the land, together with the dark prospect of enslavement in Egypt before the full realization of the promise. The first scene highlights dialogue and the rhetorical power of the divine assurance; the second scene evokes mystery, magic, the troubling enigma of the future ... the firelight in the sunset darkness contrasts with the star-studded heavens.⁸

The Lord initiates the covenant-making ceremony here as he did at Sinai, with a declaration of who he is and what he has done. He *brought out* Abram from Ur (means “light,” as the city of the moon god) and this mirrors verse 5 where God *brought him outside* (the same verb) to see the stars. Abram’s call and life foreshadow that of his descendants (see vv. 13–14).

Verse 8. Abram’s doubt in verse 3 had been met with *a promise and a progeny* as many as the stars of heaven. Now Abram’s doubt is assuaged with *a covenant*. The Hebrew term for making a covenant is actually “to cut a covenant” (as in v. 18). In the Ancient Near East and in Greece, two parties would cut animals in two and both would walk between the parts, saying, in effect, that if either party breaks the covenant, then his fate will be like the cloven animals! Verse 10b literally: “and he placed each part of it to meet its neighbour.” The word for “each” here translates the word for “man” (*ish*) and is only used of animate beings, not things, so Alter says: “the vivid anthropomorphism ... must refer to the two parties to the covenant facing each other, not to the animal parts.”⁹

In verse 12, *deep-sleep* is the same word as was used for Adam in Genesis 2:21.

⁵ NET Bible. Genesis 15, note 23.

⁶ *Mek. of Rabbi Ishmael, beshallah 7*

⁷ Berlin, Adele, Brettler, Marc Z., & Fishbane, Michael A. (Eds.). (2004). *The Jewish Study Bible: Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation*. (Oxford University Press), 35.

⁸ Alter. *The Hebrew Bible*. Genesis 15

⁹ Alter. *The Hebrew Bible*. Genesis 15

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Verse 13 starts with a repetition of the verb to know, literally, *to know you shall know*, so meaning “you shall know for certain.” The verb for “oppress” is an intensive form of the verb (oppress intensely), the same as in Exodus 1:11 referring to the taskmasters. The oppression may be hinted at in *the birds of prey* swooping down and *the deep and terrifying darkness*.

Verse 15 opens with “and you” so emphatic, “but as for you.” The oppression of the future generations will not apply to Abram’s life-long shalom.

Verse 16. The word for *generation* here should probably be taken broadly as time-span or lifespan, as around 100 years each. Notice here an example of God’s *longsuffering* (2 Pet 3:9), not willing that the Amorites be punished, but eventually, their iniquity would receive the just judgment of God, with Israel being used as God’s instrument. But notice too God’s *equity*, that Israel likewise would receive the same judgment later, through the hands of the Assyrians and Babylonians, as predicted in Leviticus 18:24–30. According to that passage, iniquity is not only abhorrent to God’s holiness, but it also pollutes the land, something dramatically manifested today in our world’s environmental crisis!

Verse 17. *A smoking pot with a flaming torch* was used in Mesopotamian rituals to ward off evil. See the strong parallel in Jeremiah 34:17–22 where the failure of the king and leaders of Judah to live up to the covenant meant that they would face the punishment of exile. But notice here the symbols of a smoking pot with a flaming torch are not referring to *Abram’s* efforts to ward off evil but to *God himself* moving between the pieces. Remarkably, it is the Lord symbolized by the smoking brazier and flaming torch that invokes the self-curse by passing between the halves alone. This covenant is a commitment of the one Party!

Verse 18. *To your seed I have given*: For the first time in Genesis, the divine promise uses a Hebrew perfective verb, not an imperfective (as in Gen 12:1–3, 7; 13:14–17; 15:4–5), so an action that can be considered completed, instantaneous, here and now. The Lord unconditionally promises that Abram’s descendants will possess the land. The promise becomes more and more definite as the reality becomes more and more implausible to the ageing Abram—until Isaac is born! For the promises and ratification see also Gen 17:1–18; 22:1–19.

Psalm 27. God is my help in all threats. This psalm is recited by devout Jews from late summer to early fall in the period building up to Yom Kippur, a bit like the Christian period of Lent. How relevant this psalm is for all those who live under the threat of oppressors and evil men like Haman in our world today!

Verse 1. *Whom shall I fear, of whom shall I be afraid?* Rhetorical questions, assuming “No-one” as answers.

Verse 2. The Hebrew verbal forms are perfects. The translation assumes the psalmist is generalizing here, “when evil men attack me ... they stumble and fall,” but another option is to take this as a report of past experience, “when evil men attacked me ... they stumbled and fell.” *Devour my flesh* is an idiom for harmful malicious speech (like the English “back-bite”), slandering as in Daniel 3:8; 6:25, and as with Haman and his cronies in the Purim story of Esther.

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Verse 3. *in this I (am) trusting*—a vivid metaphor as if he is literally under assault by armed enemies.

Verse 4. To enjoy God’s presence in the Temple, within a walled city, is also a sanctuary in a political sense, a secure refuge from threatening foes. The last verb may mean to take in with the eyes, to enjoy the sight of.¹⁰

Verses 5–6 are a play on words in Hebrew: “He raises me up on a rock (5b), and now my head rises (6a).”

Verse 6. Literally, “I will sacrifice in his tent sacrifices of a joyful shout, I will sing and I will praise the Lord.” Such psalms indicate the spiritual intent behind the sacrificial system (see the previous psalm, Ps 26:6–8).

Verse 9, to *hide the face* is a metaphor for God removing his presence, but in Hebrew, it is literally “your face.”

Verse 10, a stunning metaphor, even the most unconditional love of parents may fail, but not God’s care.

Verse 11, *my adversaries (shorerim)* may come from a root meaning to watch, as enemies gleefully watch one’s humiliation, and it alliterates with *my foes* in v. 12 (*tsarim*).

Verse 12, literally: *Do not put me in the throat of my enemies*. *Nephesh* here is used in its base meaning of gullet or throat, through which life-breath passes.

Verse 14. The psalmist begins the psalm by affirming his trust in God and reiterates that confidence throughout, and then finally at the end as well. Alter says “the trust has to be asserted against the terrors of being overwhelmed by implacable enemies.”

Philippians 3:17–4:1. Our Citizenship is in heaven. In verse 17, “Fellow imitators of me,” could mean Paul is encouraging them to follow his example, or the genitive here could have the sense of “with me,” so “be fellow-imitators with me [of Christ].” Paul speaks of his own example as one to be followed in a number of places (e.g., 1 Cor 4:16 11:1; 1 Thess 1:6, 2:10; 2 Thess 3:7, 9). The Christian is called to be like “a letter from Christ ... known and read by everybody,” including many who would not turn to the Scriptures.¹¹

In verse 19–20, again notice the distinction of the two kinds of people in the world—those whose mind is set on earthly things, and those who recognise that their citizenship is in heaven, like Abram and like the Psalmist, who have trusted the Lord and who have been credited with righteousness!

Luke 13:31–35. This passage is set in the context of Jesus’ *exodus* journey from this world. Up to Luke 9:50, Luke dealt with Jesus’ *coming*, but now he is addressing his *going* (9:51). Of course, it is a journey via Jerusalem, the city of the king, but the journey’s real goal was not geographical, but

¹⁰ Alter. *The Hebrew Bible*. Genesis 15

¹¹ Francis Foulkes, “Philippians” in D.A. Carson (Ed.), *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, (Leicester, England: IVP, 1994).

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spiritual—his “being received up” to glory, via his ascension to heaven. As Jesus travels, he challenges would-be disciple-followers about the steps they need to take, for them to travel with him that same road to glory.¹²

The section starts at 13:22 with someone asking: “Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?” Jesus responds: “Make every effort to enter” and goes on to say: “People shall come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God,” but he also makes it clear that many will be shut out from the delights of the banquet. But who are those who in verse 25 shut out by “the master of the house”? Our reading addresses this directly with two extremes—such as the fox Herod, who wants to kill Jesus, and, even more shocking, “Jerusalem ... the city that kills the prophets.”

Verse 31. *Pharisees* were members of one of the most important and influential religious and political parties of Judaism in the time of Jesus. There were more Pharisees than Sadducees (according to Josephus, there were more than 6,000 Pharisees at about this time).¹³ Some later came to be members of the Christian community (Acts 15:5). Maybe here they are concerned for Jesus’ well-being, but Jesus’ reply to them shows his mission of grace will not be cut short and his death will not be determined by Herod’s schemes.

Verse 32, *That fox*. This is not fundamentally a figure for cleverness as in modern western culture. H.W. Hoehner says, “a person who is designated a fox is an insignificant or base person. He lacks real power and dignity, using cunning deceit to achieve his aims.”¹⁴ Herod’s view of Jesus was negative (9:3–9) as he feared some messianic uprising. Herod was not interested in the heavenly banquet. He had already murdered John the Baptist at one of his own banquets (Matt 14:3–11). But Jesus was not afraid of Herod’s cunning or threats as he was following God’s plan to Jerusalem and death, “God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge” (Acts 2:23). Jesus’ statement of *reach my goal* is a key NT term for completing the plan of God (Luke 12:50; 22:37; John 19:30). Jesus, like the prophets, called Jerusalem’s citizens like a hen calling her chicks to find shelter and salvation under his redeeming protection. He called again and again (“how often”), and any who refuse his call will ultimately be refused entry to the banquet. If people use their God-given free will to reject his Messiah, then is it not surprising that as master of the house he will reject them.

Verse 33. Death in *Jerusalem* is another key theme in Luke’s material (7:16, 34; 24:19; Acts 3:22–23). And this is Jesus’ fourth announcement of his violent death (after 9:22, 44; 12:50). Notice that Jesus sees himself in the role of a prophet here. Jesus’ statement, *it is impossible that a prophet should be killed outside Jerusalem*, is filled with irony. Jesus is travelling about in Galilee (most likely), but the underlying idea is that Jerusalem, though she stands at the very heart of the worship of God, often kills the prophets God sends to her (Jer 26:20–23, 38:4–6; 2 Chron 24:20–22; Luke

¹² D.W. Gooding, *According to Luke: The Third Gospel's Ordered Historical Narrative*, (Belfast, UK: Myrtlefield House, 2013), 179–185. Also online as a PDF book: <https://www.myrtlefieldhouse.com/book-store/p/according-to-luke-digital>

¹³ Josephus, *Ant.* 17.2.4 [17.42] in NET Bible. Luke 13, note 107.

¹⁴ H. W. Hoehner, Herod Antipas [SNTSMS], 347 from NET Bible. Luke 13, note 113.

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11:51).¹⁵ Jesus does not quote an existing proverb here, but asserts the appropriateness of death in Jerusalem: since Jerusalem kills prophets (6:23; 11:47-50), it is appropriate that Jesus, as a prophet, should die there too.”¹⁶ In the end, Herod will be much less a threat than Jerusalem.¹⁷

Verse 34 recalls passages such as Deuteronomy 32:11; Psalms 17:8, 36:7, 57:1, 91:4; Ruth 2:12. The background of the figure in the Hebrew Scriptures suggests that Jesus identifies with God's care for his people and speaks for God in emotionally charged language.¹⁸ Rabbinic texts use the image of finding refuge under wings for proselytes who come under the wings of the Shekinah. This also reminds us of the words in verse 29 of people from every corner of the world gathering at the banquet in the kingdom of God.

Verse 35. Jesus now leaves the temple and the city in their hands, literally: *your house is left to you*. This language hints at Jeremiah 12:7, where the Lord says: “I have forsaken my house, I have abandoned my heritage,” and 22:5 “this house shall become a desolation.” In Jeremiah's time, it referred to the Lord leaving the temple and Jerusalem, and Israel experiencing exile from the land, and here Jesus prophesies the same again. How chilling the ironical words “behold, your house is left to you”! The judgment became concrete when the Romans razed Jerusalem and the Temple in AD 70, again as Jesus prophesied later (Luke 19:41–44). The term *house* here refers not just to the temple but to the *household* of Jerusalem, the centre of God's people who are opposed to God's will. *You will not see me* reminds us of Elijah (2 Kgs 2:11–12; 4 Ezra 6:26), who was translated to heaven until he would fulfil his eschatological role.¹⁹

The final quotation is from Psalm 118:26 (from the Hallel Psalms 113–118, recited in the festivals, Tabernacles, Hanukkah, Passover – cf. Luke 19:37–38 – and on the first day of the Feast of Weeks). The theme of *deliverance* in these festivals suggests that there was a focus in this psalm on the hope of God's future deliverance of Israel through the agency of the Messiah. Early Rabbinic and Midrashic interpretations of this Psalm (later than 2nd century CE) also reflect messianic and eschatological views. See other references in Luke to Psalm 118 in Luke 19:38; 20:17; Acts 4:11; and to John the Baptist's allusion in Luke 7:19 to “the coming one.”

Notice that, although the people rejected him again and again, and he could have rejected them and gone back to his Father, instead, he continued on his journey to suffering and death, for their salvation. Ultimately, he will bring Israel to repentance and cleansing (Zech 12:10–13:1), healing and shalom (Isa 53:3–5), so that when at his second coming they look on him whom they pierced they might be able to say through the tears of repentance, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”

¹⁵ Josephus referring to King Manasseh's slaughter of innocent people in 2 Kgs 21:16 said: “He spared not even the prophets, some of whom he slaughtered daily, so that Jerusalem ran with blood.” Josephus, *Ant.* 10.38

¹⁶ G.K. Beale, G.K., & D.A. Carson, Donald A. M. Eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Baker Publishing Group, 2007), 336

¹⁷ NET Bible. Luke 13, note 119.

¹⁸ Beale, *Commentary*, 336

¹⁹ Beale, *Commentary*, 337

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There may be three possibilities for the meaning of this quotation at this point in Luke:[15] ²⁰

1. The Parousia, the return of the Messiah, a time when Jerusalem would respond with the words of Psalm 118:26 positively recognising Jesus as Messiah (as previous paragraph). This fits in Matthew as it precedes the eschatological discourse in Matthew 24. But not so in Luke.
2. In the context of Luke's travel narrative, the reference seems to be to Jesus' anticipated arrival in Jerusalem. Then the quotation takes on an ironic meaning.
3. It could be taking the form of a conditional promise—if Jerusalem repents from refusal to accept God's messenger, and receives "the one coming in the name of the Lord" with blessing, then disaster will be averted.

In this context, 2 and 3 seem most likely.

About the Author. Dr Paul Hocking has had a varied career in education, leadership and management development, planting and pastoring of a social-enterprise church, supporting the leadership of many churches and Christian charities under the auspices of Evangelical Alliance Wales, and directing the Cymru Institute for Contemporary Christianity (2010-2019). He has qualifications in Microbiology, Public Health and Action Research, and a PhD on the Hebrew Bible focusing on the composition of the book of Leviticus. He has publications in health services management and the Hebrew Bible, including two papers for CMJ on the Decalogue and Leviticus. Paul is married with two adult children.

²⁰ Beale, *Commentary*, 338