

Sermon for March 16, 2025
The Second Sunday of Lent
The Rev. Canon Raymond Raney
Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church
Los Alamos, New Mexico

Genesis 15:1-12,17-18
Psalm 27
Philippians 3:17-4:1
Luke 13:31-35

The Gospel tells us some Pharisees warned Jesus.
Really, Pharisees? But yes, Pharisees. Not all Pharisees are bad guys.
Pharisees warned Jesus:
"Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you."
Jesus might have responded with the first verse of the Psalm for today:

1 The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom then shall I fear? *
the Lord is the strength of my life;
of whom then shall I be afraid?

I am a member of a Biet Midrash,
a study group directed by a retired Rabbi.
We meet once a week on Zoom.
For most of January we studied Psalm 27,
just that one Psalm.
We picked apart the variety of turns the psalmist takes
from praise to pleas and back again.
We Christians are supposed to believe we can rely on God.

Open your bulletins and read that first verse with me:

1 The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom then shall I fear? *

the Lord is the strength of my life;
of whom then shall I be afraid?

Therein reveals the conflict for many of us.
How much can we rely on Divine protection?

There's an old saying attributed to St. Ignatius:
“pray as if everything depends on God,
and work as if everything depends on you.”

What he actually meant was: turn it all over to God in prayer
and then work tirelessly and urgently to do God's work.

That seems to be the pitch in Psalm 27.
The psalmist doesn't ask for protection,
but rather lists the ways in which God will intervene
when possible troubles threaten.

2 When evildoers came upon me to eat up my flesh, *
it was they, my foes and my adversaries, who stumbled and fell.

3 Though an army should encamp against me, *
yet my heart shall not be afraid;

4 And though war should rise up against me, *
yet will I put my trust in him.

Then the psalmist changes the direction of requests,
and looks for a dwelling away from the turmoils of this world.

5 One thing have I asked of the LORD; one thing I seek; *
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life;

6 To behold the fair beauty of the LORD *
and to seek him in his temple.

Such are the assurances the psalmist seeks of God,

But then later in the psalm there is a question posed as a statement that I find most intriguing:

17 What if I had not believed
that I should see the goodness of the LORD *
in the land of the living!

Does God still work in the world?
Does God work in the world through us?
We cannot know the impact our lives will have on the world.

It's all too easy to think that God's goodness
only comes to us in the next life, when we dwell in the House of the LORD.
But I believe we are surrounded by the goodness of God
in creation itself and in all the people around us.
Sometimes the goodness of God comes through us,
even when we have no idea of the good we've done.

About ten years ago, the Academy Award for the Best Documentary
went to a film titled "Searching for Sugar Man."
The film tells the story of a South African man's search
for the musician named Rodriguez.

Rodriguez was a musician in the late 1960s and early 1970s,
who few people ever heard of. He was truly a complete unknown.
Critics in the film say his lyrics were more profound than Bob Dylan's,
but Rodriguez' albums received no attention,
One of his producers said that only six copies were ever sold in the U.S.
However, somehow copies of the albums found their way to South Africa.
The music of Rodriguez became the music that fueled
the anti-apartheid souls of those growing up in South Africa.
Rodriguez' music spreads among the young there and inspires
those who will work against the racist policies of the government.
And the albums and CDs produced there sell more than 500,000 copies.

But, no one knows who Rodriguez is,
and legends of his death float through South Africa.
The South African who searches for Rodriguez hits nothing but deadends
until the elder daughter of Rodriguez sees her father's picture
on a photo of a milkbox on the South African website.
Rodriguez is alive.

With no response to his music in America,
Rodriguez became a roofer and craftsman in Detroit.
He has no idea that his music is beloved elsewhere in the world.
When he and his family are taken to South Africa for a concert tour,
he expects no reception, but thousands greet him at the airport.
He plays to sold-out concerts,
and he comes to know that his music is acclaimed.
Most of the money Rodriguez makes on the tour
he gives away to friends and those in need.

We cannot know the impact our lives will have on the world.
Take the example from our Genesis reading.
God takes Abram out into the darkness and points to the sky,
and tells him:
“Your descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the heavens.”
Abram can't know the truth of God's words, but he trusts.

We cannot know the impact our lives will have on the world.
In our Gospel reading we see Jesus looking toward Jerusalem and beyond.
Jesus trusts in the goodness of God.

We cannot know the impact our lives will have on the world.
Rodriguez' music was lost on the young in the United States,
but the music he wrote and performed
inspired a generation on another continent to have the courage to fight
against a racist government, and to change the lives of a whole people.

As it says in the psalm today:

What if I had not believed
That I would see the goodness of the Lord
In the land of the living!

We cannot know the impact our lives will have on the world,
but we need only look around to see God at work in the world around us,
and strive to lend ourselves to the work that must be done.

I leave you with A Franciscan Benediction.

May God bless us with discomfort
At easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships
So that we may live from deep within our hearts.

May God bless us with anger
At injustice, oppression, and exploitation of God's creations
So that we may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless us with tears
To shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger, and war,
So that we may reach out our hands to comfort them
And to turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless us with just enough foolishness
To believe that we can make a difference in the world,
So that we can do what others claim cannot be done:
To bring justice and kindness to all our children
and all our neighbors who are poor.

Amen.