

Lent 2C 2019

Luke 13:31-35

Title: The Great Go-Between

Last weekend,

18 of our 4th graders and their parents gathered here at Grace for a retreat on the sacrament of Holy Communion.

This was our second year to hold Communion Instruction in a retreat setting rather than a series of Sunday School classes,

And it has proven to be a really special and valuable intensive kind of event.

In learning about Holy Communion,

We always also connect with the other sacrament, baptism.

We gather around the font,

Pause and remember what happened in those waters for each of us,

Often long ago.

And the 4th graders mark their parents with water and the cross,

While their parents do the same for them.

In this moment, parents were reminded of the promises they made as their now-10 year-old babies were held over the water,

Promises parents made before they knew who those little babies would turn out to be,

Before they knew just how hard it might be to keep those promises.

But there, around the font and throughout the retreat last weekend,

Parents were upholding promises.

Promises they made to bring their children to the Word of God and to the holy supper.

Being a promise-keeper is hard work.

When we meet with parents who are bringing their children forward for baptism,

We pastors walk through the baptismal liturgy with them,
Spending some time with the promises that they will be making.

There's a whole host of them!

From teaching children the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the 10 Commandments,

To nurturing them in faith and prayer--
It's a lot that we promise to the baptized.

We, as a congregation, do the same.

We promise to pray for them,

And to work alongside them in God's kingdom.

This means that, if we haven't seen the baptized in a while,

Perhaps we need to find them,

Reach out to them,

Remind them that we are going to follow through on our promises to them.

We find inspiration for our own promise-keeping in God's promise-keeping.

In our first reading this morning,

We hear of a promise, or covenant, made.

In the culture of ancient Israel and throughout the Old Testament,

The Hebrew word for making a covenant is, literally, to cut a covenant.

Connected with the sacrifice of an animal,

the body of the animal is halved,

And the one making the promise passes between the cut halves.

This walking through,

Passing through,

Indicates the promise-keeper's intent to fulfill the commitment.

The unspoken pledge here is,

“If I don't uphold my end of this vow,

Then I am to meet the same fate as this animal:

I am to be cut in two.”

Who makes a promise that is measured by death?

Only someone who is deathly serious about keeping it.

In our reading from Genesis, God says to Abram,

“Do not be afraid. Your reward shall be very great.

Look to heaven and count the stars.

So shall your descendants be.”

And Abram wonders how this will be,

For he hasn't seen that come to fruition yet.
Abram asks,
 "How am I to know?"
 "How am I to know that what you say you will do,
 You will do?"
God tells Abram to bring animals for a sacrifice,
 And Abram does so.
After cutting the animals in two,
 Abram falls asleep,
 And is caught in a deep and terrifying darkness.
But a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch pass between the
halved animals.
 These fiery symbols signify God's presence,
 Passing through the sacrifice.
God, the promise-keeper, has sealed the covenant with Abram by
passing through that which has been killed,
 By passing through death.

In the Gospel today,
 Jesus is on his way,
 Passing through,
 Curing and healing and casting out demons,
 On his way to Jerusalem--
 Where he will be killed,
 Broken,
 Sacrificed.

The Pharisees warn him--

“Get out of here.
Herod wants to kill you.”
But Jesus continues on his own way--
His face,
His fate,
Set toward Jerusalem.
Jesus continues on his way to death.

Caught up in sin, we have cut ourselves off from God,
And God passes through that separation,
That gap,
That void we have created.
God sends Jesus to walk right into it,
Right through it,
To be cut himself,
To bleed,
And to die as a sacrifice.
God enters directly into that death,
Placing God’s self right into that space we created between
us,
Standing in that void and promising,
“I have saved you.
I have redeemed you.
You will never be cut off again.”
Jesus, as God’s ultimate sacrifice,
Is the last cut that ever needed to be made.
And God, the promise-keeper,

through Jesus,
Seals the covenant God makes with us,
By passing through death. . .to life.

At our Communion Instruction retreat,
We discussed how different this Meal would feel if it were
simply a memorial--

If Jesus hadn't risen from the dead,
But had stayed dead.

We don't eat and drink his body and blood because we hope he
will one day live again.

We don't eat and drink because we hope God will come
through on God's promise.

We eat and drink because Jesus has gone between,

Passed through the space between God's intent for us,

And the ways we have cut ourselves off--

That void has been filled by the body and blood at
this Table.

We eat and drink because Jesus has passed through death and
risen to life.

In a world where God's people are killed while they are praying,

Where airplanes fitted with cutting-edge technology fall from
the sky,

Where natural disasters strike,

Where not one of us is safe from illness or

tragedy,

We find ourselves wandering and wondering,
Just like Abram,
“How are we to know that God will
do what God promises?”

We pass through this life and its dark journeys just as God’s
people have passed through other journeys:

The parted waters of the Red Sea,
The meandering miles of the wilderness,
The days of persecution.

We pass through in confidence,

In trust that God fulfills God’s promise.

Only because the covenant to rescue and redeem
us has been cut,

Jesus has gone between,

Has died,

And has passed through the
darkness and the death before us.

God is deathly serious about God’s promise to us,

And Jesus is God’s great go-between.

The word “promise” finds its origins in the Latin “pro-mittere”,
Which means “to put forward, to send forward.”

It’s an action--

Kinda like passing through.

In the sacrifice of Jesus,
God has sent God's very self forward,
Into and through death,
Bringing us through, also, to the other side--
life.

Receiving the great promise of God,
We eat and drink,
Splash and drip,
Hear, sing, and proclaim the eternal life God
promises us in Jesus Christ.
And we live as those sent forth,
promised to one another.