

I recently heard someone talking about attending their 50th high school reunion in which someone asked the former classmates an unusual question. They were asked "What fears have you conquered over the years and what new ones have you acquired?" Not eager to make their private fears public, each person present waited for someone else to open up the discourse. One person finally listed some familiar fears, including "mice," "being left out or abandoned" and "the dark." Two confessed to being lifelong phobics, one claustrophobic (afraid of enclosed spaces) and one arachnophobic (afraid of spiders). Their newer fears were more age-specific--"being doped and sitting aimlessly in a stupor in a nursing home," "dying," and "a recurrence of cancer."

This morning I am going to open up the sermon and ask you to share your fears. (At this point, people are invited to share their fears. Lots of fears were expressed).

I will tell you what my fear is. My fear is about being liked and accepted. As I look back over my 9 years here as pastor, I have come to realize that this has driven much of what I have done. Rather than just state how I see things, I have instead shared a little bit of myself and then gone back into a shell. People can't figure out where I stand because I hide behind my walls. My walls may be my position as a pastor. Behind my wall I have tried to manipulate some things rather than just being honest about how I see things.

I think there is a fear which many of us share whether we lay claim to it or not. I imagine that many of us have a fear that we get to a point in our life and we look back over our life and have a fear that we have accomplished nothing of importance. That we have a fear that we look over our life and feel as though our life means very little.

Herb McCabe writes in his book, *God, Christ and Us* that the root of all sin is our "very deep fear that we are nothing." And out of that fear is born the compulsion to "construct a self-flattering image of ourselves . . . an illusory self that we can admire, instead of the real self that we can only love."

During Lent, this period of 40 days prior to Easter, we are asked to set aside our illusions of ourselves and to become aware, as **James Alison** puts it, “of our own hypocrisy. To realize that God does not love us because we are good but because *God is good*.”

In the text that we have read, Abraham is asking this very same question. He is looking back over his life and feels that his life is empty. He feels that his life is empty because a major way that males judged their worthiness was by having heirs to continue on the family name. And in this text Abraham is looking at his life and realizes that he does not have an heir and feels a sense of emptiness and incompleteness.

When we pick up this text, God has already promised to Abraham that God will make his descendants a great nation. However, Abraham begins to worry because God has not delivered on this promise. God tries to reassure Abraham that God’s vision will come true but Abraham is worried. Abraham tells God that he is childless and that they are alone.

But then God leads Abraham out of the house and tells him to look to the skies. To look up into the heavens and count the stars. Count the ordinary stars that are in the sky every night. And these stars become a reminder to Abraham that God’s promise to him and his family is real and that God will deliver on these promises.

In preparing for this week, I was reading through the book of Genesis here in the beginning of the Bible and realizing how a common story plays itself out over and over and over again. God makes promises, the people become worried that God is not delivering quickly enough, the people become worried and fall prey to temptation, God intervenes and seeks to restore their relationships. God restores relationships because restoration is what God is in the business of doing. Whenever there is healing of brokenness we know that God is active.

I need to tell you about what I did on Friday. Kathryn called me to tell me that she was at Staples and she wanted to buy a monitor for our computer. The one we had broke even after it was repaired by David Riddle. You need to realize that I am really cheap. I do not like to spend money. She told me that she had investigated several places and that she had found the best price. I should have just listened to her. Instead, I told her that I could find something cheaper. To make a long story short, I couldn't find a reliable monitor when I started calling around to some places. In the mean time, she had left the store and then had to return later. She was not a happy camper that I did not trust her wisdom.

I realize that I have sometimes not trusted the opinions of some folks here. I have not always handled some situations well. This breeds distrust. This is a pattern which I have repeated often. Some have given up that I can ever change including my wife. For all of those times I have repeated bad habits and hurt people I truly am sorry.

I hope that this season of Lent is not just a time when I am able to confess my own sin. I hope that this season of Lent is also a time for you to confront your own struggles and temptations. We all have our own baggage or we all have our stored closets of secrets that we try to keep hidden. I am not the only one who makes mistakes and repeats bad habits.

“The Lenten season provides us with time for reflection and introspection; it is a preparatory time, moving us towards Easter. But that is not all Lent is. Lent is more than a hope that Easter will be more meaningful *this year*. Perhaps the Lenten season affords us the chance to reflect upon our own lives and in so doing, it allows us to hear the beckoning of God to live a faithful life—one that is leaning forward into the vision of God for the world, knowing full well that such a vision may extend to a horizon far beyond our own lives.”

Rather than run from the issues that confine us or pretend they don't exist, I hope that we can each have the courage to face up to our shortcomings and seek the wisdom and courage of God. We can help each other to do it.

Why is it important to face up to our faults and shortcomings? Because just like God delivered on the promises that God made to Abraham, God will deliver on the promises that God makes to each of us.

Tonight when it is dark, I invite you to look to the stars. As you look up to the stars, remember the promises that God made to Abraham that he would not remain barren. And remember that God continues to make and keep promises to us as well.

“Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are.”

Maybe those twinkling stars are reminders of God’s promises to us. AMEN.

-Quote on Lent from Tucker, Dennis, reflections on lectionary text and found at http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=2/28/2010

-Steinke, Peter, “Living by the word: fear factor,” Christian Century, 2/20/07

-Murphy, Debra Dean, “Tiger’s Sins and Ours,” Intersections, 2010

-McCabe, “God, Christ, and Us.”

=Text: Genesis 15: 1-18

-Given: February 28, 2010 in Allison Creek Presbyterian Church (York, SC)