

**The Strangeness of Lent
Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18**

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Second Sunday in Lent, 2022**

I don't know.

That is the answer to the question that must be swirling in your mind? Why is he preaching on that text?

Like I said, I don't know!

In fairness, it is one of the lectionary suggestions for this week. But then, there are four! Why not preach on the Philippians passage where Paul urges his beloved church "*I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.*"¹

Press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ. That is something that we can understand, right?

Or even better, the Psalm for this week is the beautiful and comforting Psalm 27.

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh— my adversaries and foes— they shall stumble and fall.

Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.

One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple.

For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock.

In a time when we hear and see stories of evildoers, when armies are camped against others, when our hearts are at fear; when we really just want to hide, why not that one?

I don't know.

Those were lectionary choices this week.

And you know there are other passages in the Bible! In my Bible there are nearly 1,800 pages including maps and notes. Surely there is something in there that you could be preaching on?

¹ Philippians 3:14-16. NRSV

So why? Why have you chosen this page, this bizarre story of of dreams and flaming pots?

Like I said, "I don't know!"

It's not like this is one of my favorite passages. In fact, in nearly 25 years of preaching nearly every week, almost 1,000 sermons, I have never ever preached on this text.

Maybe that was it! Maybe I just wanted the challenge of tackling a text that I had never preached on before, to see if there is a word from God in the midst of it?

I don't know!

If it is any comfort to you, midway through this week I was asking myself the same question! Why did you choose this passage. Because let's face it. Even in the story of Abraham, with the up and living home to go to an unknown place, having a baby at 100 and then being called to sacrifice his son, being told to be circumcised late in life, even in the Abraham story, this is a strange strange story.

It is strange because of where it is located. Abram has left his home because God has promised to make of him a great nation which will be a blessing to the world. He left, and took his nephew Lot and together they both became rich. And that was a problem, because in the herding business they both wanted the good grazing land. They agreed to a mutually assured division of the land and so all was good.

Except that whole father of nations thing. Abram still didn't have an heir, a child. He was worried that his slave, Eliezer of Damascus would inherit everything! And that wasn't the deal! He is doubting the whole promise thing. Maybe he got it wrong. Maybe he misunderstood what God was saying. Maybe it wasn't God at all but just a bad fig dinner!

All those thoughts were running through his head when God shows up again! God shows up reassuring him that his reward was going to be wonderful!

But then, Abram raised that little childlessness thing. "Well God, that is all well and good but there aren't any little footsteps in my tent! Can't be the father of nations when I can't even be the father in my own tent! But I guess that my dear slave can just inherit everything!"

I just love the sarcasm in the Bible! And I love the way God responds!

God takes Abram outside. In a nomadic world that was nothing new. Abram probably went outside at night many times—to make sure the cattle were safe, to make sure the fire was out, or continuing. It was something he did all the time. But on this night, God said, "Look up."

Maybe it was a cloudless night, one where there was no moon shining. Out in the middle of the dessert.

Have you ever been to a dark sky area. There is one down in Kiji. We haven't been, yet. But several years ago Anita and I were in Sedona, AZ and one evening went out on a start safari. Out in the middle of nothing, away from a town that is dark to begin with. We were out there, and after our eyes adjusted to the headlights being turned off....

WOW!

So many stars!

That is what Abram saw that night when God said, those are going to be your descendants!

Yeah but, Abram started to say.

And then God played out a scene that is one of the strangest in the Bible. “Bring me a heifer, a goat, and a ram—all three years old, and a pigeon. Bring them out and cut them in to.” And Abram did. And then, in a dream, Abram saw a smoking fire pot pass between the two halves.

What is that about?

It is an ancient contract ceremony. In ancient times walking between two parts of a sacrifice was the way parties would agree to an agreement. Rather than signing a contract, or shaking hands, they would walk between two pieces of a sacrifice. It was meant to imply a binding oath on those who participated. By walking between the animals, the person was accepting that same destruction if they broke their end of the bargain.²

But note, here only God walks through. Symbolized by the smoking fire pot, God made a promise. God made the promise that God would keep this covenant, no matter what Abram did!

It is a strange story, a strange ritual. But then, aren't all rituals a bit strange?

Rituals are the ways in which we mark a moment, signifying who we are and who we hope to be in our community. That community may be our community/community, our religious community, our family. Rituals are the ways in which we show what matters.

This next month we will see it in March Madness, the NCAA Basketball tournament. Today the colleges will be announced and for the next month it will be a frenetic time as people will pledge their allegiance for their team, and against another.

In just a few weeks we will actually have baseball and people will begin to crowd into temples/stadiums to go through the rituals of “1,2,3 strikes you're out at the old ballgame!”

Strange, if you don't know, or don't care about sports!

Imagine what it would have been like just two Thursdays ago if you had found yourself in Bali. It was Nyepi, the day before Hindu New Years, a day of a day of silence, fasting and meditation. Observed from 6 a.m. until 6 a.m. the next morning, Nyepi is a day reserved for [self-reflection](#), and as such, anything that might interfere with that purpose is restricted. The main restrictions are no lighting fires (and lights must be kept low); no working; no entertainment or pleasure; no traveling; and, for some, no talking or eating at all.³

² <https://www.bibleref.com/Genesis/15/Genesis-15-17.html>

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nyepi>

Can you imagine?

It is easy to wonder about rituals, to think they are strange when we don't know the story. So perhaps it is important for us to think about the rituals we have. Just last week we celebrated communion with the ancient words, "This is my body...This is my blood." Can you understand why one of the charges against the early church was they were practicing cannibalism?

And have you seen the meme with a baby talking on the phone saying, *"Today at church a guy in a suit tried to drown me and my family just stood around taking pictures!"*⁴

A bit strange if you just wandered in off the street.

Have you ever seen the glances that people are given in a restaurant when before eating they stop, bow their heads and talk to.... Have you even given those glances?

What are the rituals you have in your family, before meals, before bedtime? The ways you say who you are, who you hope to be.

That is what rituals do, and we all do them! My friend Amy Butler a few weeks ago said, *"even those who don't regularly participate in faith communities often look to the church on these occasions: christenings, dedications, baptisms, weddings, funerals...all of those big, important moments we feel the need to mark as human beings, and some of the small ones, too. Week in and week out we engage in ritual that should always comfort, welcome, bless, and affirm. And all of us—at some point or another—need that. It's a requirement of being human, the need to mark significant moments in our lives."*⁵

We need our rituals, even when they are strange. Maybe especially when they are strange, because they remind us who we are, who we seek to be.

Maybe that is why we need Lent, this strange season where we are invited *"in the name of the Church to the observance of a holy Lent, by self examination and repentance, by prayer, fasting, and self denial, and by reading and meditation upon God's holy Word."*

What strange words!

What a strange season in a world where we are told that we can have everything. This just goes against the grain!

And that is the point! Our strange rituals remind us—in the breaking of bread, in a day of total silence, in a smoking pot going between sacrifices who God is, who we are.

But they can be strange. Especially if we don't know the story. So might I suggest that today, this week you have a conversation about your rituals, the things you do. An out loud conversation about why you kiss goodby, or read a bedtime story; why you say a prayer before meals, or why you don't; about why you give to church, or don't.

What are your rituals?

⁴ <https://i.pinimg.com/originals/39/c0/3f/39c03ffbfafe31116b58a3bb7e6095557.png>

⁵ Amy Butler. *Marking a Moment*. Sermon preached at National City Christian Church. January 9, 2022. Used with permission.

What do they mean?

Do they have any meaning or just something we do? Or is it just something we do that really does have a lot of meaning, we just need to remember.

I invite you to a conversation that will allow us to think about our rituals, but even more, to recommit ourselves to our deepest selves.