

“Destructiveness”
Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18;
Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

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Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

It's a pretty eerie scene. It almost feels like something out of a horror movie. We watch this torch and this pot going down between these cut-open animals. I always get caught up in that moment. It's a weird sight. What's going on? Why this weirdness?

If we had lived at that time, all those years ago back when Abram was alive, we would have had a pretty good idea what was going on. This was the way you solemnized an agreement you made with somebody. You were basically saying, “I'm going to make this agreement with you and if I don't live up to this agreement, then you do to me what we've done to these animals.” It's a way of saying this is the most important agreement I can make with you.

So I could simply get caught up in this weirdness, but for all its visual and visceral weirdness, that's not what really amazes me about this passage. What really amazes me about this passage is that God comes to a human being and says, “I want to make an agreement with you.” I have no idea why in the world God does that, and yet here in this moment God comes and makes an agreement, a covenant, with this very human, human being who is worried about his future and his family and whether he will ever have kids. Here God comes to make this agreement and to assure Abram that he will have a family. In fact, God's making this agreement so that Abram's family will be a beacon to the nations. It's also kind of strange to me that God comes and asks a human being, a family, to show the rest of the world God's greatness. God enters into our lives, into human life, into our very common ways of doing things, and somehow imbues them with God's holiness and with God's goodness and expects that we can show holiness and goodness to the world.

Perhaps it feels like we continually have problems with our role as pointers toward God, maybe because it's so unexpected, but partly because of image presented in this scripture. It's not only that we see the pot and the torch, but we wonder what's holding it. Where is God? Maybe it's just that it's hard to get our conception around what we can't completely see and know.

I have a hard time sometimes when I'm thinking about travelling to another place and trying to figure out what to take with me because I can't really imagine what it's going to be like to really be there let alone try to imagine God. Maybe that's part of what leads us to be so human and have a hard time remembering this agreement God wants to make--that God wants to be present, that God wants to be in relationship, that God wants to guide us and show us a way through life.

I know that I need people in my life that I can look to, and that's what Paul is saying in Philippians. It feels a little egotistical to me at times, but he says, “Imitate me.” Of course we do need people who we can pay attention to because, Paul says, we have a problem. We tend to become enemies of the cross of Christ. We have a problem. We don't remember the covenant. We have a problem.

Let's look at Paul's points in Philippians 3:19 in reverse order. He says the problem is that we pay attention to earthly things. We have a problem. He says we have become enemies of the cross of Christ. We have a problem. In Galatians 6:14, he says, "May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world." I want to think about that for just a second. If you look back at the word that's used for "word" in Greek, which is *cosmos* (now used to mean *everything*) the word's root means *how things are ordered*. Being orderly was something that was really valued back then. It could be the adornment of a person—the jewelry, the way they have ordered themselves to be seen. So what I think Paul is talking about is the way humankind has ordered life. So he says what we have to crucify, what has been crucified to him, is the way we have ordered life, the way our society has ordered life, the way his society had ordered life because he was going to follow Jesus and because his mind was wanting to look beyond earthly things, particularly the way we have ordered life. Perhaps this very order of things is the way his contemporaries have become enemies of the cross of Christ.

Philippians 3:19 also talks about how we think things that are shameful are glory. He's talking about that in his own time, but what kind of thing would that mean, to say something shameful is our glory? One example that comes to my mind is that sometimes we say that greed is a good thing. I think scripture tells us that greed is *not* a good thing, and yet we sometimes hold up the very greediest among us as the ones who are the most important and best. That seems like taking our shame and making it glory to me.

I'm sure we can find other examples of those kinds of ways. I think another is when we think we need to be better than other people. We always have to be better. Jesus doesn't say, "My word to you is to be better than everybody else." He says it's to love everybody else. But we make being better our glory.

We used to say pride was a sin. I'm not so sure our society suggests that pride is a sin anymore. It's one of the ways we take this human order and make the shame our glory.

Paul says the reason for this is that we make our bellies our god. We make our need, our desires, our ways, our selves into our god, and what that leads us to is destruction. I don't know about you, but I recognize something of myself in what he's saying in the sense that there is a destructiveness that I can bring out in my own life and in who I am.

I can think of some other ways that happens when I focus on self, and they usually seem to be something to do with "us" and "them." We can come up with different kinds of status, and make some people less than others. We use race to make some people less than others. We can use economic criteria. We can use educational criteria. It feels to me like we have lots of ways of dividing ourselves, of making things become destructive, because when we begin to differentiate between "us" and "them" there are some of us that get to do things and there's them that don't. There are some of us that get to have a good life, and there's them that don't. That doesn't seem like Jesus' message to me. Paul is suggesting that when we quit listening to God, we can become destructive. Sometimes I think we do it complicitly, sometimes implicitly. He's inviting

us instead to be citizens of God's kingdom. The word can also be translated *commonwealth*; to be part of God's commonwealth.

Perhaps Jesus is talking about this same thing when he comes to Jerusalem and says, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem." I feel like he's almost exasperated. "If only you could listen, I would gather you under my wings, but you were not willing."

There's this comic strip that's been in the newspaper recently. It's about a young girl, part of a larger family, who has decided that the world is flat. In the process of deciding that, she's been talking to different folks that she's associated with—her family and friends—and they are beginning to say, "Well, have you thought about this?" When she realizes that if she has to think about that then it might change her mind, she covers her ears and shouts, "La, la, la, la, la..."

What it feels to me like is when Jesus is looking at Jerusalem he's saying, "You have killed the messengers and stoned those who have come to you." When I read that it's always easy to say I would never be like that, but generally what I think is that's exactly what I'm doing. It makes me wonder where in my life I'm saying I don't want to hear that prophet or that guide. How am I shutting my ears and saying, "La, la, la, la, la?"

Jesus says it's because of the unwillingness of Jerusalem to hear the prophet and the guide that they are unable to experience this wonderful image of Jesus as a mother hen. If you were to ask what animals Jesus makes you think of, how many of you would have said "mother hen?" We need to be willing to listen, to hear, and to recognize that God has come to be in relationship with us. God has something to offer us—the consolation of our savior, the guidance he would give us, the hope he would share with us. It requires a willingness, an openness, an ability to allow him to show us things we may not want to see about ourselves, about our society, about our world. We have to be willing to let him into our lives to help us see so that we might know what it means to be covered by his wings, to live in the covenant, to be in relationship with our God.

Lent is about asking ourselves, "Am I willing? Am I willing to open my heart, my life, my self to his coming and how that might change me?" He said Jerusalem wasn't willing. Are we?

Amen.