

## Divergence on the Lectionary - Second Sunday in Lent, Year C

### First Reading

Genesis 15:1-12,17-18 (omitted verses in italics)

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” And Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.” And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.” And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

And he said to him, “I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.” But he said, “O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?” He said to him, “Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him.

*Then the LORD said to Abram, “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”*

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. Genesis On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, (ESV)

### Second Reading

## Philippians 3:17–4:1

Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved. (ESV)

## Gospel Text

### Luke 13:31–35

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” And he said to them, “Go and tell that fox, ‘Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course. Nevertheless, I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.’ O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! Behold, your house is forsaken. And I tell you, you will not see me until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!’” (ESV)

## Questions and Comments for Discussion

### First Reading

In this week’s reading from Genesis, we have a verse that Paul cited in both Galatians and Romans, and whose meaning has shaped Christian theology from the time of Luther.

“And he believed the LORD, and he counted (or reckoned) it to him as righteousness.”

This verse, Genesis 15:6, was central to Luther's polemic against "justification by works" as he found it in the Roman Catholicism of his day. But given the new approach to Paul, which characterizes "justification" as more ongoing and participatory versus the static justification found in Luther, we might do well to rethink the meaning of the Genesis passage, and what Paul might have seen in it.

To summarize this particular shift in Pauline studies much too briefly, "justification" is now understood to be one's participation in what Paul saw as a future reality, rather than a one-time and sudden legal shift in one's standing before a judge. The ramifications of this shift are really significant. We are moved from a place where reciting a certain formulaic prayer suddenly makes us "saved" to a situation where we become a part of God's still-evolving manifestation of the New Creation.

This drastically changes our relationship to Judaism and mends a deep cleft left by Luther between Catholicism and Protestantism. To quote James Dunn as cited in the article that made this so clear to me, "Judaism is first and foremost a religion of grace, with human obedience always understood as response to that grace..."

But to get to this place, a re-reading of Genesis 15:6 is helpful. I won't try to summarize the whole semantic argument, but it turns out that the verb we translate as "counted" or "reckoned", which suggests that legal shift, is also the verb Joseph uses when he describes what his brothers planned for him versus what God had planned for him. (We read that recently in the lectionary!) It is also the verb that God uses in Jeremiah 29:11, "I know the plans that I have (planned) for you..."

So this verb, which I can't transliterate, can, and probably should in this context have a future orientation, a sense of planning. This makes even more sense when we consider verses 18-21 that follow only a little later, "On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites."

There is a very real sense in which Genesis 15:6 carries a future orientation, a sense of promise that is very consonant with the new readings of Paul's eschatology as one of participation and transformation, and may help us read Paul more wholistically.

Oh, and [here's a link to the article](#) by Yohan Hwang that helped me see all this. (Even if he is a Dookie.)

Second Reading

In our reading from Philippians this week, Paul starts off by asking them to “join in imitating” him. This is much more important than it may sound at first, because Paul speaks of his own imitation of Christ, so he’s asking the Philippians to imitate him as he imitates Jesus, so we in turn wind up imitating Jesus.

Why is this important?

Because imitation is fundamental to our being. We learn what to want by watching what others want and imitating their desires.

Someone said to me once in a Christian Formation setting, “Someone is always going to want what you have.” That’s right. They will. It’s hard-wired into us. It’s also an evolutionary tool for survival.

The trouble is, imitating each others’ desires leads to conflict. At first, when you want the nice new car that I have it makes me feel good. You wanting it makes it seem more valuable, more desirable to me, so I like that you want it. But then of course, it begins to threaten my having of it, so I come to resent it. And you’re not having it makes you resentful of me. And since this conflict is always going to be unresolvable at some level, the conflict builds and builds with each of us becoming more and more frustrated and resentful of those who have what we don’t and those who want what we have.

And sooner or later all that frustration creates a social crisis. The battle of all against all threatens to completely undo our social grouping.

Until we find a scapegoat. Someone on whom we can unleash ALL that frustration, and we do it all together. Everyone vents their rage on that one scapegoat and wow, peace returns, at least for a while. Until we need another scapegoat.

And it’s all because of imitation, something we can’t help doing.

But we can become aware of it, and learn to imitate differently. Paul asks us to imitate him. He imitates Jesus and Jesus’ desires. And Jesus has set His heart, His desires on God. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind and all your strength.” That is His first desire.

And that is a desire that can be imitated without creating jealousy and rivalry, because there is always enough of God to go around. In fact, as we set our hearts on God and desire God, our hearts begin to desire what God desires, and that is us, all of us. “And love your neighbor as yourself.”

And it all comes down to imitation.

Needless to say, these are all insights gained from Rene Girard and mimetic theory. They also figure significantly in my paper available elsewhere in The Vicar's Keep, called "Worship, The Redemption of Desire." Here's a link to that if you're interested.

### Gospel Text

If you read any serious study of the whole of the Gospel of Luke you will find references to the "Travel Narrative" or some such name. It encompasses the journey that Jesus begins at 9:51 when He "sets His face toward Jerusalem" and concludes with His entry into Jerusalem. This section of Luke has a lot of material that is exclusive to Luke, and many commentators have had difficulty discovering any structure or purpose to it. The frequent conclusion is that Luke had a lot of different material to use and just arranged it rather haphazardly.

While this week's reading doesn't help us to find a larger purpose for the whole travel narrative, Robert Shirock has demonstrated the way that our few verses contribute to a central, chiasmic segment. (Literary chiasm is that form in which material is arranged in an "A-B-C-B'-A'" fashion that gives meaning to its parts.)

In Luke 13:1-35 he suggests that we have a chiasm that looks like this

A - 13:1-9

B - 13:10-17

C - 13:18-19

C' - 13:20-21

B' - 13:22-30

A' - 13:31-35

I won't try to cover all the elements of the chiasm here, but [here's a link](#) to the whole article. It makes for really interesting reading.

What I'd like to focus on is our reading for this week and the other half of its pair, 13:1-9. Shirock notes that the two stories share structural similarities, 1) the reports, 2) the replies, and 3) metaphors and laments. The reports are of deaths, or the planned death of Jesus. In the opening story we have the report of those whose blood Herod mixed with their sacrifices, there are two examples of those who perish and a warning that Jesus' hearers much repent. It concludes with the parable of the fig tree owner and the possibility the tree will be cut down. In our reading for this week we have the warning

that Herod wants to kill Jesus and Jesus' response about His ministry. It concludes with the lament that Jesus' "chicks" will not take shelter in Him.

There is another interesting link between the opening and closing sections of the chiasm. They both include references to a period of time and the number three. After three years the owner of the vineyard will cut down the tree. On the third day Jesus will "finish His course."

The center of the chiasm is always the center of its meaning. Our central sections are the parables of the Kingdom. So our opening section and closing section are transformed by the "Kingdom." We begin with the call to repent and the possibility that the fig tree will not be cut down, but we conclude with the declaration "Behold, your house is forsaken."

Luke, writing in the wake of the destruction of Jerusalem, has assembled these materials about Jesus to show that His hope was for the redemption of Israel, but the hypocrisy of its leadership (other portions of the chiasm) will lead to its desolation.

I hope that it helps a little to see this week's reading in its context.