

**The Second Sunday of Lent, St. John the Baptist Church, Minneapolis
John Bellamey, March 13, 2022**

We've decided to look for joy this Lent. Nothing says we have to wallow in our sinfulness so we can get ready for Easter. Now it's true that we've had the habit of giving up chocolate, gossip, or sarcasm for Lent. We've treated Lent as a self-improvement season.

Lent has its origins in the repentance practices of Jews and Greeks. The essence of it is *turning around*. Doing a 180 from what our inner google lady has been having us do: *make a u-turn at 41st Street, then south on Sheridan Avenue South!*

Let's look at today's two protagonists, Abram and Jesus. Abe's been following God's google voice: *head west from Mesopotamia to Canaan. Go south to Egypt. Go back to Canaan.*

At every stop, he and his beautiful wife Sarai have gotten more prosperous. They own slaves, they have herds of animals, and they can dress up in fine linen when entertaining guests. God has promised them a lot of very nice real estate, but Eliezer, who used to be their slave, now sits in Damascus, and his lawyer tells him he's going to inherit all of Abe and Sarai's stuff, since he was born in their household.

Unless they have an heir; which at this point, they don't. But God says *don't worry. You are going to be the founder of a great people. Look, get up, put your robe on, and go outside your tent. {pause} Now look up at the stars and try to count them. THAT's how numerous your descendants will be. So don't worry.*

Soon enough, Ishmael was born. I wish we had time for *that* story! Later came Isaac. Abram's trust in God's promise has, ever since then, counted as proof of his righteousness. In Bible-talk, that means he stuck to the good path even when the bad paths looked appealing.

Our other hero is Jesus, who was never promised any heirs. Except us. He hardly owned anything to pass along even if he did have kids, and that wasn't happening. When religious types warned him not to go to Jerusalem, he told them, *don't worry, that so-called king can't catch me yet. I have things to do first, and then I'll go down there. There will be a parade for me, and the crowds will sing* {Chad: Schubert Hymnal S-130} Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

And yes, then Herod will kill me. But I'm not worried about that.

We're supposed to follow the Path of Love. Our Pathfinder is Jesus, who focused on the tasks at hand. There are people to be healed. Demons to be cast out. After that, he says, it will be time for the Hosannas and the trumped-up charges and "bringing out the hammers, the boards and the nails" (Joni Mitchell, "For the Roses," 1972)

So we study our Pathfinder and notice how he doesn't stress out about the future. We try to imitate his focus on the tasks at hand. One: we have people to heal. If you aren't a nurse or doctor, then the healing may be more metaphorical. You have a friend overwhelmed by money problems. A sibling whose child care just vanished. A spouse whose work is grinding them down. Healing means doing what you can, even if it's just listening without judgment.

Two: we have demons to cast out. We have more scientific terms for this. More modern diagnoses. Sometimes we find people who harbor destructive impulses that threaten to ruin, isolate, or turn us against people they love. We know what "demon" means, even if we don't believe in literal monsters. The whole world is watching one very powerful demon rage from his palace in Moscow.

Abram's demon seems to be doubt. He has a nagging worry that even though following this God of his has been a good idea so far, it will nevertheless turn out to have been useless. He needs to repent of that doubt, and get back to trusting the Path. He has to keep at it: the Path of Faith in his case or the Path of Love as the Jesus people would redefine it, is the right Path. Abram kept seeing God in visions or disguised as mysterious visitors, and God kept telling him: *go west to the place I will show you. It's gonna be fine!*

When my wife Lynnell and I travel, we approach navigation differently. I just want to know the next turn. She needs to see the whole route, on her phone and in the book of maps. When we're repairing something, she watches the whole YouTube about the repair. I watch one step, pause the video, and do that one thing. Then I watch the next step. When we pack up for a trip, half the time I randomly wander the house looking for items to pack, but she works off a series of to-do lists.

As a retired teacher, I know that my active working memory is pretty small, and that I work best one step at a time. I love the E.L. Doctorow comment that *writing is like making a journey at night. You can only see as far as the headlights but you can make the whole trip that way.* Lynnell is one of those learners who want to know what we're doing today in class, and why it's important. She sees the big picture, the right Order of Operations. I'm more like Abram: OK, what's next? She's more like Jesus: here's the plan, folks. (Score 5 husband points for likening spouse to Our Lord)

The way you *think about* the Path of your life, like your learning style or your love language, is a little different for everybody. *Actually following* the Path of Love is the point of church.

During past Lents, we've focused on repenting our selfish, narrow, suspicious cravings. This year, we suggest repenting of joylessness. Turn from seriousness, from lament, from doom scrolling, from helplessly watching people suffer, near

and far. Turn instead to music that makes you get up and dance around the kitchen. Turn to people who make you laugh. Turn to dogs who are so ridiculous you can't help but hug them and say, "good dog."

Joy is when you finish shoveling out the end of a driveway and the sun comes out. When you flip over an omelet and it's still in one piece. Joy comes when you realize you have made a new friend or patched things up with an old one.

Joy happens in your body, not just your mind. It turns the endorphin spigot on full blast, even if just for a second. It's God's way of telling you, it's biology's way of reminding you: you are loved. Life is good. Keep at it: trust me, this is the right path.