

SERMON- Lent 2 (C)
Charles R. Cowherd

Genesis 15:1-12,17-18

Philippians 3:17-4:1

St. Timothy's (Herndon)
March 12, 2025

Luke 13:31-35

Psalms 27

FEAR:

FEAR, fear of Death, fear of dying... fear also of living... runs through our readings today.

Abraham is fearful that he will die childless.

The Psalmist is fearful that God will not be there in times of trouble.

Paul, amid tears, fears that the Philippians have lost their way amidst persecution.

The only person not afraid, of course, is Jesus, who says to the Pharisees, in one of Scripture's great retorts: "Go and tell that Fox."

He tells the Pharisees... the equivalent of that viral hit: "What does the fox say?"

Jesus is not scared, that's good news. But we are.

Lent is a way to help us through our fears, not by ignoring them, AND not by artificially heightening them, but by acknowledging them, and by telling the truth about them. By saying this is who we are. We are ash, we are dust, our ancestors were wandering Arameans, who feared, doubting and trusting in God, and then feared some more.

JEOPARDY:

Our fears mean we need help.

As I read these lessons, and as I read the news every day, I hear, as background, the theme music to the show *Jeopardy!*

(specifically *Final Jeopardy*: "nuh, nuh, nuh, nuh, nuh").

It's played as we, like contestants on a game show, furiously try to write the correct answers down in the allotted time.

Time seems to be running out, perhaps in your Lenten disciplines, or simply in your life, and the music's pace gets quicker and quicker.

It's what the Pharisees are telling Jesus: "Get away from here, Herod wants to kill you." It's what we hear as well, maybe not in reference to our Death, capital "D", but in all sorts of fearmongering and cataclysms and world-ending news.

We are fearful. Maybe for good reason. Jesus, again, is not.

Back to the show *Jeopardy!*

Do you remember when Alex Trebek, the long-time host of the show, was diagnosed with Stage IV pancreatic cancer?

There was something shocking about hearing that Trebek had received that

diagnosis, even though cancer is common, especially among men of that age. It was a reminder and realization that, at some point in the future, Alex Trebek would no longer be there every evening, Monday through Friday, at the familiar time, asking questions.... or to be technical, providing us with the answers. The realization was that Alex Trebek was going to die. And he did. I don't know if it was Trebek's celebrity, the sheer regularity and ritual simplicity of the show, or maybe it was because Trebek was always (famously) in control.... He ran the game, knew all the answers (like God?!?!), that made his death seem shocking. But it's even right there in the name of the show, *Jeopardy!* (exclamation point!) which could also be the name of the game(show) called "Life" or maybe just the special edition known as "2025."¹

GOSPEL:

In our Gospel, Jesus provides the correct answer, worthy of a 'Daily Double' at least, to the fear and anxiety that the Pharisees hoist up on him. He says: "Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work." He is unflappable, because he knows who he is. He trusts in God the Father,

We yearn to have that trust in God, but we don't have the trust or the patience. We know God's promises, but we are stuck in the waiting room, and God seems so slow to act.

We said, maybe at the beginning of Lent: "Jesus, take the wheel."

But it seems like that God is kind of "asleep at the wheel."

So what we do, is we take out insurance policies, we hedge our bets, we create backup plans and contingencies.

In our Old Testament reading, God promised a great nation and the Promised Land to Abram. God did that 25 years before this lesson. And still has not delivered. Abram cannot handle God being in control, so he works out this plan with Eliezer of Damascus, he also had another backup plan with Hagar, his concubine, and Ishmael, you might remember how that worked out.

Abram doubts God's providence. Father Abraham cannot let God be God, neither can we. And so God puts him to sleep, and shows him the stars.

¹ <https://www.mbird.com/2019/03/controlling-death/>; [Lent 2 \(C\): God's Not Asleep at the Wheel - Mockingbird](#)

Our Psalm does the same thing. Like many of the Psalms, it ping pong back and forth, providing a kaleidoscope of our emotions and feelings towards God. It supposed to move from doubt to certainty, from fear to trust. It's all over the place, oh so human and so real, and thus a little scary in its honest depiction of who we are.

Abram and the Psalmist are like us. We don't feel safe with doubt, so we erect strategies to pretend like we are in control. To inoculate us, to collect us much winning as we can so we play it safe, building up on our own egos, and maybe even so we don't have to wager anything when Final Jeopardy! comes to fore.

CURRENT EVENTS:

All of this has come close to home to me, to us and this church, oh so painfully, in recent weeks.

Last week I told you the story of Father Franklin Morales, our friend who worked with our Spanish-speaking congregation a few years back. And how his immigration status, as a religious and political refugee, was being revoked such that he would need to leave this country.

As we ended our conversation, I tried to offer comfort to him, but it quickly reversed itself as *he* tried to assure me, pledged to try to come visit us before he had to leave, and then he ended by saying:

“God is Great.”

I hear the same thing when I speak with our Saturday night congregants. Through their fear, through their doubt, they say something like the following:

They pray, they put their faith in God. They trust in God's plan, saying that it was maybe God's plan to bring them from Central America. Maybe it's God's plan to bring me back there.

I want to shake them and say: “How are dare you? That's not God's plan, that's the opposite” AS if I am in charge... because I think it's MY PLAN,

I told this to Ellie, how I was wrestling with this tremendous expression of faith, bordering on fatalism, and she responded, wisely, in a mock tone:

“How dare they, put all their trust in Jesus?”

I know there is a fine philosophical line between deciding to be ostriches with our heads in the sand, and believing that we are in control of everything. I am not sure where it's drawn.

JESUS:

I know enough to look at Scriptures, and look to Jesus' example.

Most people, if threatened with their life, would not be so calm, cool and collected. Jesus is, and he is because he knows who he is.

He knows that politics is not his destiny, that terrifies the political leaders.

And he knows that religion is not his destiny, that terrifies the religious leaders.

That makes him really dangerous.

Worst, he reveals that he too is going to die, just like Alex Trebek and just like you and me. Well, worse, he will die a violent/painful death in Jerusalem, just like the prophets of old... "all of whom came up empty" when their lives were jeopardized by church and state.

Jesus tell us, in his life and his death: "I know what Lent feels like. I know what being scared feels like, I know your problems of addiction and loss, of family difficulty, of the nightmare of bureaucratic predation. I know what dying feels like. And I am still not afraid."

CONCLUSION

We are not Jesus, thank God,

but Lent is about our fears, and sticking our nose in the very thing that we are afraid and scared and anxious about.

It is a way of trying to help us not conquer pain, or avoid it, or overcome it, but it's a way of recognizing who we are in the face of the world's fears.

In Lent, particularly this week, that great Easter hope of the Resurrection is hidden in Jesus' coyness with the Pharisees, it's hidden in the strange ceremony that God enacts with Abram. It's hidden in the Psalm this Ping Pong Match between faith and doubt.

It's hidden in all of our lives: we pray "I believe, help my unbelief" and we know, deep down inside, that we are dying, we will die, as dead as door knobs, and we will rise again.

The only thing to say, the only thing we can control, is the immortal refrain::

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

AMEN