

Philippians 3:17-4:1    Heavenly Citizenship  
March 13, 2022

The text we have heard is a challenging one, even though it seems, at first glance, to be somewhat straightforward. Before taking it up, consider briefly with me the other readings for the day; the Old Testament Reading from Genesis 15, Psalm 27, and the gospel reading from Luke 13.

Genesis 15 is known as the Abrahamic Covenant, in which God promises Abram that his descendants will number as the stars and become a great nation, even though at the time he had no descendants. He is not promised much in his lifetime, but that his descendants would spend 400 years in a foreign land, oppressed and mistreated.

We know how that worked out; the problem is not so much that it didn't come true, as it is that it did come true, and afterwards the, "happily ever after," turned out not to be so happy. After the 400 years the nation did achieve a modest empire and there were many descendants, but there were also troubled times that led to decline and fall, a destruction of their realm. The rise of, and then the decline and fall of, Israel as a civilization is the central question of the Old Testament.

The 27th Psalm comes in the middle of it all, and though we are not going to read it now, it is enough to say that one can sense the vulnerability in it, the unease that comes with the reality that one has

something to lose, and very well might. The advice is to wait patiently.

The gospel reading is known as the, "Lament over Jerusalem." Jesus is on the way there for what will be his last visit, the one that turns tragic, and there is tragedy in his words, which happen to be one of the bible's feminine images of God, "O Jerusalem . . . how often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were *not* willing." Isn't that the human story? "Now your house is desolate."

Consider the pathos in these texts for a minute or two, a sadness that is characteristic of the season of Lent, even if we agree that it is not an ultimate sadness, the melancholy does not get the last word, it must yet be encountered because it is a part of the sacred text, and also the experience of life.

It may help to reflect upon our own times. Just the last 20 years or so will do. Because of the attack on 9/11 we were told that the world had changed. Recent events may challenge that conclusion. The attack led to two difficult and long lasting wars. There have been numerous natural disasters, two major financial crises, a pandemic, increasing polarization, not just at home but also around the world, and now there is a war in Ukraine that has a Cold War era feel to it. The world is still under the shadow of nuclear war.

There have been ongoing efforts to solve several problems; not only the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, the

Sunni/Shia conflict, or the East/West American/Russian conflict, but the usual litany; racism, sexism, poverty, disease; which all stubbornly persist. There is a long list of personal issues with which people still struggle. All the while in the west there has been a continuous decline in church attendance which has also yet to be understood and solved.

The challenge of the text we *have* read, the one from Philippians, is that it represents a period in Paul's life when he is coming to terms with the same kind of realities we face, the consummation of the age was not as near as he thought, while his end was approaching quickly. Earlier in this letter he brought it up. "To live is Christ, to die is gain," he wrote. The problems are not solved, we continue to wait.

Jesus told his followers that some of them would not taste death until "these things" were accomplished. Some believers in every generation since have come to believe the end of the age would arrive in their lifetime. In the Letter to the Hebrews, on the other hand, the author describes the faithful as being on a journey in search of a homeland and he says, tragically, "they all died without having received what was promised." Isn't that the human story?

We are caught somewhere between the "some of you will not taste death until these things have taken place" and the "they all died without having received what was promised," tension in the biblical story. It seems it should all be resolved by now like the promise to Abraham, his descendants having already

come and gone as the great nation it was promised to him they would be.

And Paul offers us one of the biblical answers;

"I have told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ . . . their mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ."

Our belief in heavenly citizenship is not meant as a salve to tide us through until we get there. It is meant to be a way of living faithfully while we are in this life. To lead lives characterized by integrity, goodness, truthfulness, sacrifice, not giving in to a futility that justifies living by lesser standards because we are yet in this world and feel helpless to do anything about it's problems, but instead, raising the heavenly standards for the world to see; grace, mercy, and love, and justice.

And a hope that endures; one that is not defeated by failures and contradictions caused by greed, or whatever convinces people to justify their actions, by the human tendency to disregard others in the pursuit narrower concerns, or even by the passage of time beyond our life spans. Our heavenly citizenship is now, and it strengthens, enables and encourages to rise above the turmoil and live towards the sacred and the holy in every moment and every place.

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