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Sermon transcript

St Philip Oak Bay

9.30 am Eucharist, 5 March, Lent 2

Rev Canon Peter Parker

Starts: 30:46

<https://youtu.be/4CNT2J7gTTE?t=1846>

I speak to you now in the name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

The Psalm for today – had we read it – would have us saying, “I lift my eyes to the hills.” One of the great pleasures of living in Victoria is that we can often turn a corner or go over a rise and suddenly look across the straits at the Olympic Mountains, majestic and permanent. There’s something solid about that sight that is reassuring to us – “I lift my eyes to the hills.” I like to think of the composer of Psalm 21 – maybe it was actually David, in his youthful shepherd years, sitting on a hillside as the sun set, hoping the sheep would be safe from the marauding wild beasts of the night. I imagine he looked to the hills, often so beautiful in the evening light, and felt the same sense of reassurance we get when we look at the Olympics or at the Rockies, a sense of awe and comfort at the permanence and beauty of those mountains.

Now, we are all plagued by different types of marauding wild beasts that threaten our safety and our wellbeing – illnesses, job losses, financial disasters, relationships which go bad – and the big new constant in our lives, of course, climate change. So easily we end up hurting and bruised. But from these marauding and hurtful intrusions in life the hills give us no real help. This was David’s realization and affirmation in that famous psalm: he says, “Our help comes not from the hills but from the Lord.” Now some days in Victoria the sky is clear, and the view from the top of Mt Tolmie is spectacular. Mountains all around. Other days, it’s typical West Coast weather, and everything is totally obscured. But we know they’re still there. And so it is with the Lord. There are times in the dark, cloudy moments of our lives when we can’t really make out the presence of Jesus. It feels like he simply isn’t there. But we know that he is, always standing at our side. We are in the Lord’s sight all the time, even when we can’t see him. We may not always have that warm, reassuring sense of his presence, but as we know the mountains are behind the clouds, we know that Jesus is there just the same.

Today we heard the beginning of the story of Abram, called by God to leave his familiar surroundings and go to a place he doesn’t know. Abram’s response tells us some things about him, and some things about ourselves. Abram’s response tells us he was courageous and willing to take big risks. It may also tell us that he had a wonderful relationship of openness and trust with his wife Sarai. On the other hand, it may tell us he didn’t care two hoots about what his wife had to say about career changes or journeys into the unknown. My dear wife could tell you some things about that. [35:00] The other thing this story tells us for certain about Abram is that he was not afraid to relinquish control over his own life. He did not insist on being the author of his life story. He was willing to let go of predictability and certainty. We call Abram the Father of Faith. Once again, we see that the opposite of faith is not doubt but certainty. There was no faith needed by Abram if he had been left with all his familiar certainties. God called him away from all that, into the uncertain, into the unknown. This is the journey of faith: not the planned, pre-reserved bus tour of certainty, but the plunge into a future that will not look like the past – to quote a certain bishop we heard recently. Abram teaches us that, for the most part, we are control freaks when it comes to our lives – we want to be in charge, we want to know the answers, the plans, the dates, the colour of the carpet, how many square feet in the new house. But Abraham, our father in faith, was told only, “Go to a place I will show you.” No moving company, no map, no job to go to: just set out. He was willing to relinquish control of his life in order to follow God’s call.

I think the worst paralysis that we can ever know is the paralysis of not being willing to follow God’s call. And God sometimes calls an individual, but most often, He calls a people. You notice the old patriarch Abram did not set out alone – he had a whole community of persons with him.

Something else we learn from Abram about ourselves is that we have too much stuff. How could he just pick up and go like that? Because he didn’t have so much to carry. It took a semi to move my household from Campbell River to Victoria; what Abram had could fit onto his animals’ and his own back. It’s a great gift to be able to travel light. Our culture has us majoring in the acquisition of goods: some of them useful, some of them beautiful, a lot of them pretty much unnecessary clutter. I’m not suggesting that we should get rid of all that is around us, but we all need to learn what the mystics called *detachment*: the ability not to be owned by the things that we own.

Many years ago, a friend of mine who lived in Errington - lived in a beautiful log home that they had built themselves - was visiting a neighbour for coffee, and she looked out her neighbour’s window, back at her own house, to see with horror that there was smoke pouring out of a kitchen window. Naturally, she ran home to see if she could deal with whatever was on fire; she put her hand on the front door and it was so hot she realized she did not dare open it. She told me, “Peter, I knew then I had to walk away from everything we had built and everything we owned.” And she said, “Peter, I have never felt so free in all my life.” That’s detachment.

Abram had that, and he had that because his ultimate trust was not in his possessions, not in his traditions or culture, not in his abilities, not in his career, not in his cash flow or his investments, but in the God who was calling him. Nicodemus is another man we learn from, a man who was weary of the tight, rule-bound lifestyle of the Judaism that he led and represented. He was hungry for a new, different way, although he wasn’t sure what it would look like. He’s heard about Jesus, this intriguing and troublesome young rabbi that his colleagues have already tried to shut down. So he has this secret meeting and conversation with Jesus, and by the time he gets there, the spirit of God already has a foot in the door of his soul. “Rabbi,” he says, “we know that you’re a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” And Jesus *sees* Nicodemus, as Jesus always sees each of us, right to the core of his soul. He wastes no time in zeroing in on Nicodemus’ one major shortcoming: he is too tight. He is too tight; so tight that he squeaks. He needs to be renewed in the faith of the forefathers, to have the courage to let go and move forward. “You must be born over again,” says Jesus, “then you’ll be set free.” The spirit of God in us will always do that. And, like wind, it’s known more by its effects than by any published agenda or map.

We who call ourselves people of faith have to work constantly, in this materialistic world, not to look to the “hills” of our goods for help. We who call ourselves followers of Jesus have to learn to be detached from our mountains of affluence, which, in the end, cannot save us. We who call ourselves the body of Christ, the Church, have to learn that our health and security does not lie in the beautiful hills of past heroes, memories, and traditions. Only in God will we find our help. Only in God will we find our true destination, our identity. The spirit of God is given to us for our new birth through the grace of Jesus who is with us now, beckoning us forward into a new life, and a new ministry, that He will show us. Amen.