



ST ALBANS

Woodcutters

March 13, 2022, Lent 2

There once were two woodcutters. One day, they had an enormous amount of wood to split between them. The first got started right away, quickly chopping and stacking. The second started by sitting down. The first looked over at the second and muttered to himself: "What's she doing? We've got a ton of work to do, and she's sitting on her duff." The first woodcutter worked non-stop all day, while the second paused many times and sat down. The first woodcutter was so frustrated! When the sun went down, the two woodcutters stopped their work. The first was shocked: the second pile of stacked wood was twice as large as his own. He was more than a little annoyed. He asked the second: "How on earth did you manage to get all this wood cut? You were constantly sitting down!" The second woodcutter replied: "Each time I sat down, I sharpened my axe."

"How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" You were not willing.

Ash Wednesday was the first day of this liturgical season we call Lent. In my sermon on Ash Wednesday I talked about repentance, which is a key theme of Lent. Did you notice that we begin each Sunday in Lent with the penitential rite? We start the service with confession. On Ash Wednesday I reminded us that the Greek word that's translated to repentance is metanoia, which means a conversion, a turning around, a change of direction. So repentance is all about having a change of heart. I said that sin is far more than a bad deed. Sin is anything that keeps us from a close and loving relationship with God.

But the word "sin" is so loaded, it can actually get in the way of our desire to be closer to God. So instead of calling it sin, I'm going to call it a barrier. Sins are barriers to a close and loving relationship to God.

I reminded us that God is always there, standing at the door knocking. God wants to come in, to be in relationship. Nothing we can do or say changes God's desire or love for us. God is always, always, always at the door. But we can put barriers in



ST ALBANS

the way of that relationship. We can decide not to open the door. God doesn't force God's-self on anyone. It's always an invitation. And that's what we're invited to think and pray about in Lent. About the barriers we put up, or that others have put up for us, that get in the way of us fully accepting that invitation.

Now what do I mean by barriers? Jealousy of our friend's success. Gossip in our workplace. Negative self-talk. Not giving people the benefit of the doubt. Assuming the worst in people. Not appreciating all the good in our lives. Fear of the stranger. Not sharing what we have with those who have less. Not sticking up for those who are treated unjustly.

This is what Jesus is getting at in today's Gospel. "I long to gather you up under my wings, but you were not willing." I can imagine a mama hen, spreading her wings, with some of her little chicks safely tucked underneath. But there are always a couple of stragglers. Nah, I don't need you mama, I'm just gonna poke around over here, on my own. We have a part to play in our relationship with God. It's a two-way street.

Our barriers may be conscious, or they may be unconscious. Like the woodcutter not knowing enough to sharpen his axe, we may not even know about our own barriers. If that's the case, then what? How do we identify the barriers and get rid of them? I'm proposing there are two steps to this.

Step one: we ask. We ask God in prayer. We engage in discernment, either by ourselves or with someone we trust. We ask our fellow woodcutter: "hey, how come I'm not going as fast as you are with the woodcutting?" And we try and be open when we are told the answer. It's not always easy. We ask God, ourselves or someone we trust to show us our barriers, and ask for help in removing them.

This discernment needs to happen individually, but also collectively. Where do we, as a community, need to remove barriers? Where do we, as a society, need to remove barriers?



ST ALBANS

This past week we celebrated International Women's Day. It was a chance to reflect on the progress women have made towards equality in many areas. We have so much farther to go. Where do we, as a society, still have barriers to women's participation, advancement and flourishing in our society? Where is our collective sin when it comes to women's equality?

Step two in identifying and removing barriers can be a little more difficult. Step two is: we trust. We trust that God is just outside the door, knocking. We trust that God is always there, wanting to be in a close loving relationship with us.

The story from Genesis is about trust. Did you notice that the story is about a man named Abram and not Abraham? Abram becomes Abraham later in the story, but he's the same person. It's the same with Abram's wife Sarai, who eventually becomes Sarah. God makes a covenant with Abram, and promises him ancestors and land. Abram believes, but still wants to do a very human thing. He wants God to prove it. He wants to be sure.

This story with the animals cut in half, with the smoking pot and flaming torch passing between them. That's quite the story, isn't it? Even though this may seem very gruesome and/or mystical to us, at its core, this story is about trust. It was an ancient practice for people to cut an animal or animals in half and pass through its blood. This was a symbolic gesture called "cutting a covenant", where a person "symbolically asserts that they will keep their word lest their own body be severed like the animal whose blood they walk through".¹

The smoking pot and burning torch in Abram's vision represent God. God descends to Abram's level to meet him where he is. Even though God is making a divine promise with Abram, God descends and does a very human ritual to prove to Abram that this is for real. To seal the covenant God makes with Abram, in a way Abram can understand. God met Abram where he was. And God meets us where we are.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revision-common-lectionary/second-sunday-in-lent-3/commentary-on-genesis-151-12-17-18-5>



ST ALBANS

Are we ready to do this this Lent? To ask and to trust? It sounds simple but it's hard to do. It's hard to be vulnerable, to ask ourselves and God where we need help. But it's worth it. It's the first step in bringing the kingdom of God on earth. Let's sharpen those axes. Amen.