

## Lent 2, Year C

As you just saw I will spend time with our children this Lent going over the 10 Commandments, partly because they are so foundational and partly because children need some assistance making sense of them today.

But as important as the 10 Commandments are, this morning I want to talk to you about a different commandment, and if repetition is any indication of importance, then this is the most important commandment in the Bible because it is the most often repeated one.

Do know what it is? It occurs at the beginning of today's OT Lesson, when the Lord came to Abraham and uttered it for the first in scripture. "Do not be afraid."

That command runs all through the Bible, beginning here with Abram, and soon on to Moses, Joshua, and David, the prophets, the Blessed Virgin Mary and right through to the Book of Revelation.

"Do not be afraid" is uttered by the Father, the Son or one of the angels over a 100 times in the Bible, and the frequency of its repetition does say something about its importance in scripture as well as its importance in our daily lives as Christians living in the world.

I have a couple of points of reflection on this commandment, and I will use today's story about Abram to illuminate these reflections.

First, whenever the commandment not to fear occurs in scripture, it is worth noting the most natural response of the human being in each story is precisely that of fear.

Abram was a wealthy man and successful in every respect, except one. He had an abundance of possessions, his own private military to protect himself and all he had, and in Sarah he had a wonderful wife.

But in an ancient culture where the only view of life after death was the offspring one produced, Abram lived in fear because he and Sarah had no children.

Oh, and they weren't getting any younger. Abram and Sarah were probably about 80 and 70 respectively at the time of this story. So he feared for what would become of all he had done when he was gone.

Like all humans, Abram could only see as far as his own concerns. God, of course, sees it all, and God, knowing his fear, spoke directly to it, saying: "Look toward heaven and count the stars...so shall your descendents be."

What a profound and moving way to tell Abram that he need not fear, he would have more descendents than the stars in the sky. How moving, how comforting, how

ABSURD! Sarah was 70 years old, long past her child bearing years, how exactly was God going to do this?

Do you remember a few weeks ago I preached on the theme of call stories, and how call stories throughout the Bible all share a similar pattern which also parallels how we experience God's call today?

Well this command to stop fearing is often connected to one of those call stories, usually because of another theme that runs throughout the Bible, applies to this story about Abram, and is my second point of reflection about why we need not fear:

Because with God all things are possible. That point intentionally echoes the very words of the angel Gabriel to Mary: "For nothing will be impossible for God."

"Hey Abram I'm going to make you the father of three world religions."

"Hey Moses, through you I'm going to set people free."

"Hey Jeremiah, I want you to go to the king and tell him to change his ways, or I will send the King of Babylon to change his ways."

"Hey Mary, I know you're just a poor 13 year old girl who isn't married yet, but I want you to bear and raise the savior of the world."

For humans these things are impossible, but with God all things are possible.

Now this is where I need to be a little careful. You know, sometimes on Sunday nights I watch those religious services on cable, just to see what the competition is doing. There's this fellow, Joel Osteen, who is pastor of the biggest church in America. He's in Houston, Texas and his church is the former basketball arena of the Houston Rockets of the NBA. Before I appear to bash the poor man let me say that I'm sure he is doing godly things for godly reasons. I could be pastor of a mega-church, except I don't have the big hair that all those guys seem to have. But sometimes when I tune in it sounds like he's taking my second point too far. I said, "With God all things are possible" not guaranteed or necessarily probable. But some clergy come at this material as if God will do whatever we want if we just believe enough.

And that is exactly backwards. It's not about getting God to do what we want, it's about God trying to get us to do what he wants, and PROMISING that he will be with us and will see to the end result. What he wants for us is to trust and to follow. In Abram's case, the story tells us that he believed the Lord, and the Lord reckoned, it to him as righteousness.

Well that's Abraham, what about us? What are you afraid of? As children we start with things like the dark or the bogie man. But as we grow, our fears become about things that are much more tangible: Is my job safe? Are my kids or grandkids going to be all right? When I die, will I have to suffer?

To all these understandable fears our Lord comes to us and utters the most frequently repeated commandment in Holy Scripture: "Do not be afraid. You're never

alone because I am always with you. Trust me, follow me, and I will guide you through everything.”

Tonight, take a step out your door and look up at the stars, and remember that story about Abram thousands of years ago. Remember his fear. Then realize that you are one of those descendants represented by the stars of the sky. Yes you. Then consider your own fear. What match is it for the God who created the entire universe, created you in his image, looks you in the eye and says: “Do not be afraid!” AMEN.