

**FIRST LESSON: Genesis 15:1-2, 17-18**  
**SECOND LESSON: Philippians 3:17-4:1**  
**THE GOSPEL: Luke 13:31-35**

**The Second Sunday in Lent**  
**March 17, 2019**

**“Lenten Reflections: Righteousness”**  
**Sermon Preached by Pastor Lowell D. Nelson**  
**American Lutheran Church of Sun City**

Grace, peace and truth be to you through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

Thank you for being here today to listen to the good news of God’s love. The theme for our Lenten reflection is righteousness, which is a big word. It means, my definition, right relationship with God and with others, and with one self. It’s a relational word. I find it interesting that as people become, as they say, more spiritual but less religious. The whole point of religion is to reconnect to the relationship with God. It’s a God who desperately seeks relationship. I have heard it said by some of my more fundamental friends, you know you have to have a personal relationship with Jesus. Like it’s something you have to do on your own. This is the God we have who seeks relationship with us, and we proclaim that love today and tomorrow, for all of time.

The righteousness that is often shown is our own righteousness, self-righteousness. Usually if someone is self-righteous, that means they are right and you are wrong. It’s kind of an easy thing, as a pastor when you work with somebody, if you are experiencing someone is more righteous than you, it may be the case, maybe they are onto something with the love of God you haven’t discovered. But quite often they are scared and they have to self-justify. To be scared, or they are concerned about what is going to happen, they are afraid. Or they don’t know what’s going to happen in the future, so there is lots of time that we as human beings self-justify, we are self-righteous. The antidote to this is very simple, trust God. You can trust God, you can believe that God loves you, that God cares for you. It’s the basis of our faith, that we can trust God. Ourselves, ups and downs. God, consistently, beautifully righteous. God’s purpose is clear, to redeem this world through Jesus Christ. So I ask for your Lenten reflection to be as simple as that, to think about God’s righteousness, and less of your own, and be able to be freed.

The Old Testament text itself, the Genesis text, is a pivotal chapter in the Bible. It really is one of those that needs to be reread. Genesis 15, Abram in a vision, this experience of the Lord, “Do not be afraid Abram, I am your shield, your reward shall be very great.” To me, in a way, that’s a summary of the good news of God’s love in Christ. These three things – I think are accurate, at least it’s been said to me, that 365 times in the scriptures, it says this phrase “Do not be afraid.” Do not be afraid friends, brothers and sisters, new friends. Do not be

afraid, God's love is secure. That is a universal need. It's the antidote to self-justification, to self-righteousness, when you know of God's love and invitation to live in this confidence. "I am your shield." Way to say it, you know what a shield is, "I am your protection." Less self-righteous, more God's righteousness, God's love through Christ, God's love through brothers and sisters in faith, God's love in the body of Christ. I am your shield and your reward will be very great. Do not be afraid of the future, God's love for you is secure. There is good news, God has won, the victory is complete, and your reward shall be very great. The living presence of Jesus Christ for eternity.

Then Abram said, "You are absolutely right, I have no fears, you are my defense, and I won't worry about anything." Oh, wait, that's not what it says. It says "But..." that is just such a beautiful human expression, right? You hear clearly from God, and our first response usually is "But..." Abram said, I won't go into great detail of it, but he had children with his slaves, but not with his wife and wives. It's too primary, identity back in those days. So this name, Abram, was actually an insult to him. I just wanted to say that to you. The reason it's an insult to him is it means exalted father. Here he is with his wife not able to conceive children.

Just think about that, every time somebody says his name, he feels embarrassed. He needs to defend himself, but he is losing faith, he is losing confidence. This is where the Lord comes and gives him the sign of the hope and this continued understanding that you will have not an heir outside of your own issue, but you will have more than you can count. Look towards the heavens, so shall your descendants be. And this beautiful phrase, "He believed the Lord and the Lord reckoned to him his righteousness."

That's so pivotal because Paul took that phrase, Luther took that phrase, we can take that phrase, that our righteousness comes from simply trusting the righteousness of God. Baseline is trusting God. He believed the Lord and the Lord reckoned it to him, accounted it to him, imputed it to him, gave it to him as a gift of righteousness.

Abram needed more, so he had a covenant ceremony which was the way things were done there, when there were relationship of covenant, it was most often two unequal partners that would join into relationship with one another. Perhaps you were hearing the words as Dick read them about this sacrificial thing about these different animals being brought. The idea of the covenant experience back in those days where you would bring a three-year-old heifer, a female goat three years old, and a ram three years old. It's always funny, even though I grew up in West Point and I was a townie, I lived inside, I worked for Hoegemeyer Hybrids, I worked for DeKalb, so I kind of have an idea, lots of city folks will say three year olds, what a cute little animal. Right, it's a little three-year-old? You know better than that, don't you? Three years old – big animal, right? Big as you are going to get, maybe back in those days we could say they might not be quite as grown genetically as we do now, but that's a big animal, it's not a little baby, it's a big animal. What you would do in the covenant experience, you

would cut them in half, and then stack them. The covenant partners would walk through that stacking, very dramatic. A little sense of humor here, it says something to that, they did not cut the birds in two, that's because they were little, you can't walk underneath them, that's what that's all about, right? So you have these big animals, very dramatic, lots of blood, and the idea is you walk through together, and if you aren't together, you are going to die, it's as simple as that.

We take this faith and move it into the circumcision of our Jewish brothers and sisters as a sign of the covenant. The depth of that of shedding the blood. We now take this into the depth of life. What I want to say to you is – we still need to know it's at the root of life and death that God has our back, that God is for us. So we have two covenant experiences – baptism, not simply the washing away of sin, but the new life, death and new life raising from that. And of course, holy communion, the body and blood of our Lord and Savior. You can think of it not so much walking through, but walking together. Without the Lord I am lost. Without the Lord I need to self-justify. I need to conquer my fears through very weak ways. I just encourage you to place your trust in the Lord. Place your trust in God's love.

The righteousness of God is this power that enables Christ to make all things subject to himself. So the Gospel lesson itself – I love thinking about Jesus, knowing each one of us, sometimes when I fail or fall short of the grace and glory of the Lord, I know that the Lord knows me. How do I know that? Because I know that the Lord knows everyone. When Herod, this is the son of the one who tried to kill him when he was a baby, this is Herod antipas. These are Pharisees that are coming out of concern, they don't want Jesus to be killed. He says this, "Go and tell that fox," he knows Herod, he knows you, he knows me, there is no need to defend ourselves, it's God's righteousness and this idea that he needs to be on his way. This is a righteous God we have who casts out demons, performs cures today and tomorrow. And then on the third day I finish my work. We certainly understand the resurrection theme here, on the third day.

I want to give a shout out to the maternal instincts here, this has some farming instincts here with the Luke text. "As a hen gathers her brood under her wings." If you have ever seen that, the beauty. This is a description of God's maternal love, a beautiful image, not the normal masculine images, "as the hen gathers her brood", and this great love God has for you and for me.

I want you, as you reflect upon your Lenten, I want for myself as I reflect on my Lenten season, I want to be less self-righteous, and I want to be more trusting in the Lord. I want to be less afraid in understanding God's righteousness. I now want to encourage you on something I am going to share on a personal note so that you get to know me a little better. I wasn't sure if I wanted to share this. I don't know how you received the word of the Lord, a vision, a dream, a Bible study, friends in prayer, solitary, out in serving people and having an epiphany from

the Lord. It can be the sermon, it can be the music, it can be God is relentless in pursuing you to give you a vision of hope, to not be afraid, to know that the Lord is with you, that you can live with confidence in the Lord. I want to just share this concluding story.

When I was in between work, which is usually called unemployment, I had left my healthcare position, I didn't really know what I was going to do. If you want to mess with a middle aged guy, take away his job and his income stream, his title and a place to go. I was kind of vulnerable. I am not saying I was seeking God's righteousness, but God was opening up that path. I had a dream, it was actually in the early morning hours, probably around 4:30. In my dream, nothing I had experienced before like that, I heard a very strong, beautiful, feminine voice say, "Go help him." Then there was a picture of my pastor. It was so audible, I woke up and I was looking at Debbie and I was trying to figure out what was going on. It wasn't Debbie's voice, but it was a beautiful voice.

I now understand it was the voice of the Holy Spirit for me. I hemmed and hawed, that was clear. Do not be afraid. I am your shield. So I took two weeks to finally go see my pastor. Back in Nebraska, it's not your normal sentence to say to your pastor, "I had a dream about you." I stumbled through that, it really was difficult for me to say anything, but I wanted to follow up what that was, so I finally spit it out. I said, "I think I am supposed to help you." His response is something I will never forget. He wept. He had been praying for someone to come help him. So the righteousness of God is not just individualized, it flows. When we are open to this, however God speaks to you, I ask you to not be afraid and trust. The reward is great because it's a reward of doing God's work that moved me into ministry in ways that of course now I look back and say, "What a gentle movement of the Spirit." That's the same spirit for all of us, right? Trust in God's righteousness. Amen