

A Sermon for the Preacher
June 22, 2014
Second Sunday After Pentecost
Gretchen Schoon-Tanis

I never thought I would ever say this in my lifetime but I'm certainly glad my mother and my in-laws couldn't join us for worship today! When Jesus states he has come not to bring peace but a sword that will pit daughter against a mother-in-law and a son against a father you worry about what worship could have looked like today.

But in fact, strangely enough, the first image that came to mind when reading our Gospel passage from Matthew wasn't a sword - we're so far removed in some ways from that type of weapon in our society today - but a seam ripper. Are you familiar with this tool? This tool is used to cut the tiny threads that bind up hems. And I got to thinking about all of the ways we stitch together our lives with the large and small threads that hold us together. The threads of relationships, friendships, work and recreation, we stitch ourselves together with belongings and boundaries, with projects and purpose and promises. But Jesus uncomfortably states that unless you are willing to take up your cross and follow him you are not worthy of him.

This sermon is for the preacher today because we have taken a seam ripper to our lives recently in an effort to follow Christ - my husband Phil has taken a new job with the World Communion of Reformed Churches and at the end of July we are moving our family to Hannover, Germany. Moving is a significant step for anyone, whether you are moving across town or across the world. But even more so for our family because the entire Tanis family lives within a five block radius of one another! But bit by bit, thread by thread we are attempting to say yes to Christ by following. We are acutely aware of the seam ripper in our lives as we cut ties with our family of origins as well as our family of God - you are the body of Christ - as we transition our lives in an attempt to live more fully towards God.

But as I contemplate taking up my cross and following Christ it seems like I pick up an equal weight of fear as I go along. The list isn't abnormal – it probably might sound familiar to anyone who has attempted anything new - pulling off the move, meeting new people, building new friendships, learning a new language, kids starting a new school, being away from people and a place we love with our whole heart etc. And this fear that I feel and experience I recognized in the story of Hagar, Abraham and Ishmael today.

Our Old Testament lesson is a fascinating story of anxiety and fear and letting go. As we'll recall, God promised Abraham and Sarah to make their offspring as numerous as the stars in the heavens, but Abraham and Sarah didn't fully believe God so they took matters into their own hands. Sarah recommends that Abraham take their servant Hagar as his own and Hagar births a boy named Ishmael. After Ishmael is born Sarah then becomes pregnant and gives birth to Isaac and this is where we pick up the story for today.

Abraham and Sarah are throwing a party for the community because Isaac is being weaned. At this time Sarah witnesses Ishmael and Isaac playing together and panic sets in - Sarah worries that Ishmael will try to steal the inheritance that is due Isaac. The first thread of fear is jealousy. Sarah demands that Abraham cast out “the slave woman and her child” and ban them from the community. She is unable to even name Hagar as she dictates to Abraham.

The second thread of fear is from Abraham who is torn about sending his son away. This is his firstborn son - what will happen to him if he is thrown into the wilderness? But God speaks and Abraham does as his wife Sarah demands. He rises early in the morning, provides Hagar and the child with bread and water and banishes them to the wilderness of Beersheba.

Third Thread of Fear:

Once the water in her canteen runs out the desperate fear of death overtakes Hagar and she sets her child underneath a bush unable to watch his imminent death. As any parent would do, she lifts up her voice and sobs at the predicament she and her son are in. And it is here that the goodness of God breaks in to the story - calling her by name God reassures Hagar that he has heard the voice of her son, opens her

eyes, and shows her the well where she and her son can be refreshed with life giving water.

People of God, what are we afraid of? What are you fearful of? Are you worried that God will not make good on his promises? Are you afraid to let go? Are you afraid to set down? Do you fear being abandoned? Abraham was afraid to let go of his son. Hagar was fearful of death as she set Ishmael under that bush. Ishmael was not only abandoned by his father but by his mother as well for a short time. Yet God heard his voice and responded. The name Ishmael literally means "God hears." The threads of fear that entangle us on a daily basis have the power to bind us up so tightly that we lose the ability to live in the freedom of our souls. Friends, today the Good News is that the opposite of fear is Faith!

For freedom Christ has set us free and the threads of life that God knits around us are ones of provision and promise. Psalm 139 states that God knew us even before we were knit together in our mother's womb. God knows the number of hairs we have on our heads and if God cares for the sparrows of the world how much more does he love and care for you! 1 Corinthians states that we are clothed with Christ - we are new creations! And if we are clothed in the glory of Christ we will live in the new life Christ has offered us.

Faith today is the fact that when we let go of our fear God provides provisions for our journey. Faith today is that when we set down our fear God opens our eyes and points us to those wells that have springs of Living Water within. Faith is knowing that even though we might feel we are all alone in our personal deserts God calls us by name, listens to our voices and rescues us.

So Phil I confess that this new journey is partially my fault as well and the ball got rolling many, many years ago! Come with me as I look back on my ninth grade year of high school. Like most teenagers I was having a bumpy transition into high school trying to figure out who I was, who my friends were going to be, and what life was going to look like. But in late fall my dad got fired from his job. The most difficult thing about that was he was a pastor so not only did my father lose his job but I lost the church I had grown up in. We spent the rest of the school year visiting

a new church every week because we couldn't go back to the church where my dad had worked.

In the spring we were in church on a Sunday morning far from home and I was complaining to God, giving God an earful about our predicament. Why was he doing this to us? Why had he abandoned us? Where was he in the midst of all of this change and sadness and uncertainty? And then, similar to Hagar, my eyes were opened to God's truths I had learned as a child - if I was talking to God so far from home yet I also talked to God while at home, that means that God was with me no matter where I went in the world. That had such a profound effect on my life - at that very moment - I said to God that if he would watch over me and protect me no matter where I went in the world I would do anything for him. I think God might be taking me up on my offer!

Church, this process of taking up our cross and following Christ is not without pain and worry and fear. It is hard to cut the threads of fear that bind us up on a regular basis. But, this week, people of God, I'm going to try to live in to the Good News of this sermon: to let go of my fear, to set down my worry, and to lift up my voice in prayer knowing that the God who loves us intimately promises to care for our every need. I'm going to let go of my fear so that God can fill my arms with his provisions. I'm going to set down my worry so that my hands are free to hold fast to the hands of God. I'm going to lift up my voice in prayer because I know that God hears my voice, calls me by name, and will continue to make good on his promise to never leave me or forsake me. Join me us on this journey of faith friends - it has proven to be an amazing adventure.