

Sermon
February 28, 2021
The Rev. Dr. Gail Cafferata



Early this spring a neighbor planted some strange plants in the mow strip between the sidewalk and the street. He planted them as seeds because they came up from bare earth, a riot of them, green, thick and crowded together. Now they're nearly two feet tall with wide, thick, green leaves and white and purple flowers strung along stalks like gems. My grandson would lovingly call the garden a "jungle!" A few weeks ago I asked Ed what they were. Fava beans, he said. He said they'd fill the soil with nitrogen so his spring and summer bulbs would prosper. I could see some daffodil greens peeking up in midst of them. As he spoke I remembered my garden failures last summer, the puny tomatoes, pole beans that took forever to bud, the basil and squash that never prospered. Now, here is a good idea!

We are in the season of Lent, a time in the Northern Hemisphere where the days are blessedly longer each day, and we plan our gardens. Lent comes from the "Old English [lencten](#) *springtime, spring.*" Lent is a time in the church year when we plant new seeds in our hearts by living sparingly, gratefully, and consciously of God's presence. We may pray in new ways like chanting or meditating, or the daily office with an Anglican prayer book from another nation or monastic community. We may join with others in mid-week ZOOM worship, bible or book study. We may browse through seed catalogs to reconnect with the soil, water and sun in new ways. We may do our daily Covid walk with a different mindset—maybe watching or listening

for new birds, studying the neighbor's landscape for ideas, or photographing the glory of God's beauty. We try to be more aware we are walking in a garden where angels hide in the ground, sing in the trees, and speak to us in words once told around a desert fire.

This is the second Sunday of Lent when the church reminds us of the gardens and roads in which our predecessors in faith—Abraham and Peter—lived and walked. During this pandemic it is not difficult to see the ways our various gardens have failed to thrive, depleted as they may be of life-sustaining communities and work. The virus has devastated families with illness and death of loved ones, workers and employers with a devastated economy, students with loss of sports, schools and parties. I grieve that I can't hug our Boston and North Carolina families, race my new blue "go fast" sailboat with friends, or play in our local community orchestra. Each of us may be suffering loss, the depleted earth beneath us a mirror our grieving souls. I mightily need this year's Lenten spiritual disciplines, to listen to today's scriptures. For me, Lent is like planting fava beans in our souls, preparing the ground for new, abundant growth, restoring what's been depleted, bearing hope for new beginnings.

We begin today with Abraham, a complex figure. A quarter of a century before today's lesson, at the age of 75, God calls him to leave Haran for a new land where God promises to make him a "great nation." Passing through Egypt and other lands, arriving finally in Hebron, God makes the covenant with Abraham we hear today, an everlasting promise that he will be the "ancestor of a multitude of nations. ... Kings shall come from you." God blesses his animal sacrifice with fire, and renames both Abraham and Sarah. Even with that assurance, at age 99, I imagine Abraham still wonders how he will have a child with old and barren Sarah.

Abraham is a faithful man who embarks at what might have been the last years of his life on a pilgrimage to a new land, but along the way his heart proves as fickle as last year's summer garden. When famine forces him to enter a hostile Egypt, he gives his wife Sarai to Pharaoh, saying she's his sister. When Pharaoh discovers the ruse, he sends Abram away. Years later in Mamre where God makes today's covenant, he will doubt God's promise that Sarah will bear a son and enter her slave Hagar's tent instead. How fully human a man he is.

The story of Abraham reveals not only how Abraham hurt Sarah and failed to trust God, it also shows the depth of his faith, and the compassion of God. Truth be told, when God called Abraham to move with God to a new land, he went. That encounter with God set him on a life-changing journey, what we might call today a pilgrimage. A pilgrimage is a "holy journey" where we can remember God's blessings in the past, live with a present awareness and openness to God's presence, love and wisdom today, and seek God's guidance and blessing on some future we can't imagine. A pilgrimage recognizes that we live and move on sacred ground, ground that God has blessed to us for the time that we spend there. In pilgrimage we orient ourselves to the future by engaging with God along the way. As Christians we turn to Jesus, and Jesus who is our sun, our North Star, our magnetic north is with us just as God was with Abraham and Sarah, and with all who trust. In pilgrimage, we often encounter God when we least expect, as the disciples who left their fishing boats would tell us.

God knows our journeys as Baptized people may be filled with danger as well as promise. We may say as the psalmist today does, "I shall live for him," meaning "I shall live for God," but

like Abraham we will fail. We will hurt God, others and ourselves. At times, our gardens, our souls, will be fallow. See how Peter, like Abraham, is so fully human. Peter, full of faith, is the first disciple to proclaim, “You are the Messiah!” and the first to turn around and rebuke Jesus because he doesn’t check all the boxes he expects in a Messiah—warrior, political agitator, leader of a rebellion against the Romans. As in the story of Abraham, God is patient, forgiving, and compassionate with Peter. Unlike Pharaoh, or any other national leader who punishes, expels and exiles all who disagree with him, Jesus doesn’t shun Peter. Instead, Jesus respectfully rebukes Peter’s aspirations to kingly prerogatives, power and influence and speaks to the crowd, and to us. “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life FOR MY SAKE, and for the sake of the Gospel will save it.”

A pilgrimage is not just about us, our health, our souls. It is for the sake of the Gospel, for Jesus. It is not running away from danger, but if called by God, to run through it and into it to save and serve others for Jesus’ sake. And Jesus will be there for us as he was for Peter with a breakfast of fish even after the disciple slept at Gethsemane, denied Jesus three times and fled from the crucifixion. Jesus sacrificed himself rather than live the lie of the human quest for power, privilege and wealth. He came to show us what it means to walk the pilgrim way—to take up our cross and follow him.

There are so many examples of people walking the pilgrim way that have come to me this past week. My daughter was a gymnast who trained in a gym of a future Olympian and Olympics coach. She raised my awareness of punishing exploitation in other gyms. This week I heard for the first time the story of Rachael Denhollander, an Olympic gymnast who bravely reported abuse by her U.S. Olympic Coach to authorities, tragically not once but many times over before she and others were heard. Her faith in Christ’s justice, forgiveness and grace fills her courtroom victim-impact statement:

Should you ever reach the point of truly facing what you have done, the guilt will be crushing. And that is what makes the gospel of Christ so sweet. Because it extends grace and hope and mercy where none should be found. And it will be there for you. ... I pray you experience the soul crushing weight of guilt so you may someday experience true repentance and true forgiveness from God, which you need far more than forgiveness from me – though I extend that to you as well.

I can only imagine the depth of her faith and her community of faith that healed her, kept her safe and nourished her courage along this pilgrimage.

In pilgrimage, we encounter God every day, and encounters with God change us. Some are startling and momentous, like God’s revelations to Abraham and Peter. Others are seeds that grow slowly in our hearts over a season or years. The 7-year journey of writing my book was a pilgrimage deeper into the heart of God. My research meant expenses like the printing, postage and data entry for more than 250 surveys, transcription of 80 interviews, a new computer and software and others. In the midst of it I applied for a grant. It was rejected. I chalked it up to inexperience and applied a year later. That too was rejected. This time I cried for days but it wasn’t about the money. I soon realized it was about my ego, a sense of entitlement that needed to go. By grace, prayers, scriptures, friends, family, new colleagues picked me up at the side of

road, giving me courage to apply a third time, which succeeded. The foundation said, "It just kept getting better and better." Christ was there.

By grace, Jesus gives God's people wisdom, strength and courage to bring healing, peace and justice to you and others. By grace, Christ will bless you this Lent as you walk the pilgrim way as Abraham and Peter once did, and as Rachael Denhollander and countless others have. This may take some hard work, like seeing how gardens we planted in hope have not flourished despite our best efforts. Sometimes our hearts are depleted, and we need to go on pilgrimage.

After talking with Ed, my grandson and I watched a You-Tube video on how fava beans make a good cover crop. They take nitrogen from the air and concentrate it in nitrogen-rich white pellets on roots that break down in the soil after lopping off the tops. For me, now, Lent is like planting fava beans in our souls, nurturing, expanding, and strengthening our hearts with the seeds of love our Lord will tend. "I will be with you until the end." We can trust that promise with all our hearts, our souls and our minds.