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Lent 2C
Peace, Seattle
February 21, 2015
Genesis 15:1-18, Luke 13:31-35

OUR LONGING – GOD'S LONGING

Interviewed while visiting the ancient ruins of Persepolis, the Iranian man wasn't comfortable giving his name, but he did speak of his deep longing—to leave his home country and to go to Canada—not as a refugee but as an émigré.

Educated as an engineer but stuck in a menial job in a food processing plant, he figured that in 10 years he'd have the money set aside to take his wife and daughter with him and leave Iran for good.[1]

Issaquah High senior Kacie Moorehouse has a dream, too; one she's longed for since taking up wrestling in the seventh grade: to win a state championship. She was unbeaten and ranked #1 heading into last year's state tournament when a skin infection prevented her from competing. This year, as of yesterday, she was one match away from obtaining what she's longed for.[2]

Abram and Sarai, too, had a longing. A longing they'd once thought was as dead as the ashen remains of a nomad's fire long since abandoned.

Unbelievably, their longing was rekindled when Adonai spoke to Abram these words:
LEKH LEKHA — GO WHERE I SHOW YOU, AND I WILL GIVE YOU A SON,
AND YOU WILL BE A BLESSING.

This promise dared Abram and Sarah to believe the impossible…and they did, for a while. But weeks became months and months became years, and with no new word, no new sign, doubt began to creep in.

Over and over Abram replayed in his mind his encounter with God. Had he misheard? Misunderstood? No. The Voice had been clear: An heir. A place. A blessing. But HOW? WHEN?

And now this:
DO NOT BE AFRAID, ABRAM, I AM YOUR SHIELD, YOUR REWARD SHALL BE VERY GREAT.
Lord, it's been a long time…and still no child…no heir—unless my slave is to be heir—is that what you had in mind?!
NO, ABRAM, HE WON'T BE YOUR HEIR—YOUR VERY OWN ISSUE WILL BE YOUR HEIR.
But when?!

Abram hears God, but he wants something more. So God invites Abram out of his tent and has him look at the stars.
COUNT THEM, IF YOU CAN MANAGE, God says. SO SHALL YOUR DESCENDANTS BE.

As he beholds those stars, something shifts for Abraham. It is a shift not based on human reason or logic but on a primal awareness that God is indeed God.[3]

[1] http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2016/02/19/467205019/at-persepolis-irans-grand-past-overshadows-its-frustrating-present
[2] http://www.seattletimes.com/sports/high-school/girls-wrestling-issaquahs-moorehouse-looks-to-cap-senior-season-with-a-state-title/
[3] W. Brueggemann, Genesis Commentary. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 143.

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Struck by the enormity and sweep of God's promise, which is both for him and beyond him, Abram understands in a way he didn't before that God is not a hypothesis about the future, but the very One who will bring that future to life.[4]

By all evidence nothing has changed, except that Abram has come to believe in the speaker of the promise.[5] And trust finds a nesting place in his heart once more.

On Friday Chris and I saw the film BROOKLYN—a poignant, tender film, superbly acted.[6]
It touched us on many levels and got us thinking about the nature of longing.

The film tells the story of a young Irish woman named Eilis who, lured by the promise of America, leaves the only home and community she's ever known for the shores of New York City.

The transition is a rough one. But through the help of a family friend she has lodging in a Brooklyn boarding house and a job to make ends meet. And bit-by-bit the intense feelings of homesickness diminish as she grows accustomed to her surroundings, learns new skills, and is pursued by a young Italian man with whom she falls in love.

As a vision of what the future could be is laid before her, tragedy intervenes to call her back home. And now Eilis must choose between two countries, two longings, and two alternate futures.

These stories I've referenced, as diverse as they are, are all marked by longing.

And in our gospel, Jesus himself expresses the desire that lies at the very heart of God:

> HOW OFTEN HAVE I LONGED TO GATHER YOU AS A HEN GATHERS HER BROOD UNDER HER WINGS, AND YOU WERE NOT WILLING!

Mid-way into Luke's gospel Jesus has made his share of enemies. But whoever they are, fox or fowl, he will not run from them. His appointment with death is not subject to Herod's will. His death can only happen in Jerusalem.

Recalling all that has been won and lost through Jerusalem's long and tortured history, Jesus laments over the city that has broken God's heart time and again.

> JERUSALEM, JERUSALEM, CITY THAT KILLS THE PROPHETS AND STONES THOSE SENT TO IT! HOW OFTEN I HAVE LONGED TO GATHER YOU AS A HEN GATHERS HER BROOD UNDER HER WINGS, AND YOU WERE NOT WILLING!

Where is your longing taking you this Lenten season?

Toward a focus on the future? A grappling with the past? The ever-present present?

The thing about longing is, however deeply felt it may be, you can never force the outcome. Our longings, our desires, whatever they are cannot be achieved in the end if they are coerced. This is a truth to which Scripture testifies again and again.

There's no way God can force us under her outstretched, protective wings.
No way God can coerce us into relationship. No way God can make us love her.

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[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2381111/

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Yet, God never ceases to reach toward us—inviting us into her heart—even when that invitation is rejected and finally leads to the cross.

If you have ever loved someone you could not protect, then you understand the depth of Jesus' lament.[7]

It makes no logical sense, this kind of self-sacrifice on the part of God with so much at stake. No sense at all. Unless, that is, the power at the heart of the universe is unleashed through that self-giving.

And this is exactly what the gospel claims.

In Jesus God becomes utterly vulnerable—even to the point of death on a cross. And we who bear his name are called to believe and to trust that in this death we receive the truest possibility for transformation and for life.

What it is that we long for this Lenten season?

Are we willing to experience the ministry of Jesus even when it is uncomfortable or challenging? To find compassion for our enemies, even those who want to put us to death?

In our intensely divided, violent world, what might it mean to long for our enemies to experience Jesus' compassion even as we ourselves have?[8]

This world, with its myriad predators striking with tooth and claw, is forever inventing new ways to scatter and destroy. Enamored with power, driven by fear, it is intent on building more walls than bridges.

But the church, when it is faithful to its Savior, is all about gathering together.
Gathering the vulnerable, the weak, the defenseless, gathering the poor, the helpless, the little ones; gathering them all under the Savior's holy wings.

Amen.

[7] Barbara Brown Taylor, *Christian Century*, February 28, 1986.
[8] These questions, edited, were proposed by Ruth Ann Reese in her article at WorkingPreacher.org. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2770