

**Sermon 3/16/2025: *Where do the Children Go?***

**Genesis 15.1-18**

**Luke 13.31.35**

When Jen and I were talking about this Sunday...

And Jen's meeting about her work with the Mental Health Task Force at Grace Church in Jenkintown...

And the scripture selections for today...

The theme of children came to the fore.

Ministry to children and youth is a large focus of the Mental Health Task Force at Grace Church.

And children are prominent subjects in both scripture selections.

So that was decided.

I needed a title.

And this song from the Hooter's pooped into my head....

- How many know the Hooters?
- Great "regional" band from the 80s...

"Where do the children go?"

Not going to sing it...

But a sampling of the lyrics, reveals the thoughtful, spirituality of the song-writers, Eric Bazillion and Rob Hyman...

Like this:

Surrender into the night  
Silently take my hand  
Nobody knows what's inside us  
Nobody understands

\* \* \*

And this:

We're leaving it all behind  
While castles are falling down

We're going where no one can find us  
And if there's a heaven we'll find it somehow

\* \* \*

“Where do the children go?”

If that question leads us down a path of examining what ails kids today...

Of asking what choices they are making and why...

I don't intend to go there...

Because that's not where our scripture goes.

While Jesus genuinely loved children...

I think he saw them as more than objects of affection...

To be picked up and hugged and played with...

I think he saw them as agents of God's Kingdom.

The scripture behind today's Story Time makes this clear....

In Mark 9,36-37, after Jesus finds the disciples arguing about who is the greatest among them...

He responds by PLACING A CHILD AMONG THEM, and then taking the child in his arms, he says:

<sup>37</sup>“Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”

Do you hear what is going on there?

The child is presented not to admired as cute and playful and compliant...

But to silence the arrogance of the disciples...

The child's presence has that power!

I had not intended to use that scripture, but when I saw it in Eloise notes for Story Time, I had to...

And you might see a connection between that point and Jen's talk after this...

When I think she will talk about the role of children as participants in Christian education through drama...

\* \* \*

In our Gospel passage today, we see a different – more metaphorical role of children in Jesus’ ministry....

Jesus is making his way to Jerusalem – where he will be arrested and put to death by the authorities....

And he is causing quite a stir along the way by working miracles, teaching provocative parables and calling his fellow Jews to repentance...

Causing, what the famous, now deceased, Civil Rights leader John Lewis would call “a little good trouble...”

And it was probably that last thing – repentance – that caused the greatest stir...

Lent is our season for repentance.

And being in that season right now, it seems appropriate to talk about this aspect of the Gospel story.

We [point] are all sinners...

We [point] are all in need of repentance...

And we practice that discipline of confession and repentance every week...

And in this season of Lent we practice it more intentionally...

Believing that we can become closer, and more obedient, to God in the process.

We are a community of sinner/repenters – repentant sinners.

But being on the repentant sinner side of the equation...

We repent, because we know the grace of God’s forgiveness in, Jesus Christ.

But the authorities in Jerusalem – Herod being the Jewish authority and Pilate being the Roman authority...

They did not see repentance as a door to grace...

But as a threat to their power...

Because power – and their abuse of it – was their sin...

And Jesus’ call to repent....

Was – to them...

A call to surrender their power...

To surrender to God...

\* \* \*

We tend to think of sin and repentance as matters of personal choice and behavior...

But Jesus knew that his call to his Jewish brothers and sisters to repent had much larger implications...

It was part of the power struggle between the prevailing kingdoms of men...

And the coming kingdom of God...

\* \* \*

So it is that, in our Gospel passage today, in Luke 13, Jesus is met by some Pharisees [explain...]

He is met by some “friendly” Pharisees as he approaches Jerusalem, and they warn him:

31 ‘Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.’

And indeed, Jesus will die in Jerusalem...

A Roman governor, Pilate, will put him to death on a cross...

To accommodate the political need of Herod, King of Judah...

To appease the religious establishment in Jerusalem...

And knowing this, Jesus pressing on:

‘Go and tell that fox [Herod] for me, “Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.

<sup>33</sup>[T]oday, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem.”

And he laments that his journey will end this way, with his death in an unrepentant Jerusalem,

34 Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

This is not what Jesus wants...

This is not what God wants...

God wants repentance.

To “gather the children of Israel together...” under his protection and care...

That is, in his Kingdom to come...

So here we see that children are a metaphor for something very large and profound...

These children – Jesus’ Jewish family – are part of the Kingdom to come...

And that Kingdom will come to them too...

Because, while this journey to Jerusalem will end in Jesus’ death in an unrepentant Jerusalem...

He will return...

And they will recognize him, and turn to him:

And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”

The Kingdom will come and it will come to them yet, as blessing.

That is how the story ends, friends...

Not with Jesus’s death...

Not even with his resurrection...

But his return...

To a repentant world of God’s children...

Who are blessed in recognizing Him.

The children, in this story, are not cute and cuddly creatures to be adored...

They are the would-be inhabitants of the Kingdom of God...

Who are destined for redemption...

For gathering by God...

For Blessing....

And they PARTICIPATE in that redemption...

In that coming of the Kingdom that blesses them...

By their repentance...

By their recognition of Him...

As their Blessing

\* \* \*

If that is the end of the story...

Our reading from Genesis 15 is, in some sense, the beginning of that same story...

Or at least a critical chapter in that story...

Of this family...

That is destined to be part of God's kingdom of blessing...

The kingdom of God's children...

But here, the children and their part in the story are not just metaphorical ...

Here, the story is about the actual children of Abram – and one child, in particular...

Isaac...

Abram has been called by God out of his homeland – Ur of the Chaldeans...

And promised a new home...

A new land...

And promised the blessing of children...

Not only children and the land...

But that his children will become a great nation...

And not only a great nation unto itself...

But a nation that --- Abraham will be told again and again...

A great and blessed nation...

THAT WILL BE A BLESSING TO OTHERS

Indeed, we are that through this this great nation to be built upon Abraham's descendants ...

All the nations of the world will be blessed ...

Walter Brueggeman, the great Old Testament scholar ...

Refers to this chapter 15 of Genesis as:

probably the most important chapter of this entire collection (in Genesis) it is been judged by many scholars to be the oldest statement of the Abraham asked Faith from which the others are derivative it is been utilized by Paul in a distinctive way for his great teaching on justification by faith. There is no doubt that this chapter offers crucial resources for the themes of faith and covenant.

Abraham – referred to in chapter 15 as Abram – is the father of our faith...

Not just the Jewish faith ...

And faith is the point of this story of God's covenant with Abram ...

I had wanted to spend more time on this, but I'm just going to highlight some of the themes and conclude my message leaving it to you to ponder the text and these themes ...

And, again the theme I want to emphasize is the place of children in this story.

The story is about an actual child ...

Abram and his wife Sara are referred to in the story as "barren..." --- Childless in their old age, with little hope of having children.

This is really a cultural label that Abram puts on himself....

For God clearly does not see him as "barren" or lacking...

To the contrary he is a man of great faith who will step out in belief on the promises of God....

Even when they aren't perceptible to him...

In this moment, he is concerned that all the blessings that God has bestowed on him to date will be fruitless...

Because he has no children...

And it appears he will probably have no children, because he and Sara are old ....

And that means that all he has been blessed with...

Will pass to another...

And not to his own descendants...

So Abraham's perspective here is very real and very earthly...

He wants his own children...

And God will bless him with his own children...

And descendants...

\* \* \*

That struggle to have children of our own...

Is a very real struggle for many...

It was a struggle for Jen and I...

And it put the blessing of children in a whole different perspective for us...

\* \* \*

But I want to stress most of all here...

That while Abraham was blessed with his own children...

The real blessing that Abraham experiences...

Is the blessing of the faith that allowed him to believe that God could do that...

That God could do what seemed impossible even to him...

And not only give him his own children...

But give those children....

And so he himself...

A special part in the history of salvation...

\* \* \*

And the immediate blessing of this experience of Abram with God in the story of the covenant in chapter 15 of Genesis...



It is what God has already given him...

God has given him the faith to believe in all these promises...

That are not yet given to him...

But will come to him...

In time...

And some of them...

The greatest of them...

What come through children....

His descendents...

That he will not live to see or know in his earthly life...

But descendents who will become the key participants...

In the salvation of the world....

One of them...

Jesus.

\* \* \*

[The experience of faith begins with what we lack...]

\* \* \*

The point I want to leave you with about this story is that...

The role of the child here...

Is not just to give Abraham something of his own...

And not just to give Abraham something he wants for himself...

But to give Abraham a promise of a future that he can believe in...

To give Abraham a promise of a future that he can believe in...

That is what the child in this story presents...

The promise of a future...

A promise too far off for Abraham to see or even live for in this life...

But a promise he can believe in...

A promise he can trust and faith...  
And a promise that is fulfilled ultimately...  
Through his greatest descendent...  
Jesus...

\* \* \*

So, where do the children go?

To put the children first is not just a commitment to our children or even to children in general

It's a commitment to the future.

It's faith that foster's hope in that unseen future that we hand off to the next generation

And it's about caring for the vulnerable.

So "Where do the children go?" is not necessarily about what kids do with their spare time...

It's not necessarily about the choices they make and praising them for good choices and judging them for the bad ones...

It's about where we choose to put them?

Where do we put them in our families?

Where do we put them in our churches?

Where do we put them in our communities?

I want to talk about that a little bit....

About what place – what role and status children are to hold...

In our lives?

In our sense of self?

In our sense of purpose?

In our sense of reality?

If we are contemplating children, and have to answer the question:

Okay, where do these go?

Where do we put this thing we call children?

Where do the children go?

Where do we put them?

In another part of the building so they don't disturb us?

Or on a deeper level, do we relegate them to passive recipients of our instruction?

Or active participants in our own spiritual growth?

As extensions of ourselves to be shaped and formed in our own image?

Or agents of revelation bearing something of the image of God to us?

Are they incompetents to be led around and told what to do?

Or capable leaders themselves, ("And a little child shall lead them?")

Does our penchant for infant baptism blind us to the God-formed agency that children really are?

E.g.:

- Compare infant baptism to Adam's baptism
- Compare the J and conquest and judgment in Revelation, or the God of powerlessness on Christmas or the crucified God on the cross? Jesus of the manger to the Jesus on the cross to the Jesus of Revelation: is our God the God of power image of God on Christmas to