

Karla Hunt

Gen 15:1-12; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

Sermon for 13 March at St. Peter's

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable to you, O Lord, my Rock and my Salvation. Amen.

For many of us, the word obey, O B E Y, is a four-letter word. We don't like to be told what to do, what to think or how to be. We think obedience infringes on our individual rights. We don't want health authorities to make us wear masks, we don't want government to close businesses even for the best reason, and we don't want prophets to tell us how we fail to live up to the dream of God. It's a knee-jerk reaction; we don't stop and think critically about the instructions and what compliance hopes to achieve. We're just ornery, stubborn and cantankerous. We want to argue because we think we're in control and to admit that we're not, is too frightening to consider.

In today's OT lesson, the Lord is making promises to Abram but Abram doesn't immediately accept this. He complains that he doesn't have a child of his own and since wealth is tied up with children, how great can a reward *be* without offspring? Abram needs an heir so that his inheritance stays in the family and the Lord assures him that he will indeed have a child and that his descendants shall be as numerous as the stars in the night sky. And just like that, without any evidence but with only the assurance of God, Abram *believes* the promise "...and the Lord reckons it to him as righteousness."

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Righteousness is “th[at] state of being in the right or being vindicated...”¹ Sometimes it means to be faithful to those with whom one is in relationship, to rely on them and let them rely on you. Abram is made righteous because his relationship with God is faithful and reciprocal; he trusts God thereby winning God's favor and this attitude of acceptance and faith is pleasing to God so God pronounces him righteous. Abram is righteous because he trusted God's promise, and because he does this, he is obedient to his relationship with God.

But Abram will not live long enough to realize the promises, he will not be there when the promised land is finally achieved. It's many years and generations until that happens and in fact many of his descendants never *do* get there because they are not obedient to their *own* relationships. The promises made to Abram are part of God's big picture, much larger than any one individual life. When I get impatient with what seems to be unanswered prayer, I need to remember this.

Last Tuesday, I had the privilege of hearing Jemar Tisby speak about perseverance. You may recognize him as the author of the book, *The Color of Compromise* about how the Church has been complicit in not addressing, and even advancing, racism. He encourages us to stay the course and look back over history to note how long it takes for real progress to be made in the area of civil rights and just societies. It isn't

¹ *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*

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a one and done process, we take two steps forward and one step back. It takes years for real change. We, like Abram, are called to be obedient and persevere not necessarily for ourselves alone but also for those who will come after us. The arc of the universe does indeed bend toward justice but not as quickly as our human minds would like it too. It's easy to get discouraged. Nevertheless, progress *is* being made, no matter how slow it seems or how far the pendulum swings backwards, we are well-served to remember that our obedience helps bring about the completion of God's purpose for the world.

Paul urges obedience to the example he takes from Christ and imitates, so that the Philippians can see how they are to "live according to [Paul's] example..." Paul *warns* us, in case we've forgotten, that the world doesn't like it when we live according to another standard. The world will mock and humiliate those who obey God and in some cases, the world will kill them. But Paul encourages us to "stand firm in the Lord" and do not let this knowledge deter us. If we are obedient, then like Abram, the Lord will reckon it to us as righteousness and our reward will also be great.

"[O]bedience, [is] submitting to the will or authority of another. [But t]he OT has no separate word meaning 'obey'. [The word 'o]bey' translates [from] the Hebrew 'to hear'. The concept is also expressed as

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'keeping' or 'observing' the commandments and 'walking' in God's ways."²

Jesus does this very well. He rejects the dominant culture with all of its trappings, he refuses to accept the social practices and violence that this society is willing to live with. He walks in God's ways knowing full well that he's risking his life by doing so. He is convinced that Herod can't touch him until he finishes his mission in Jerusalem. Jesus will not die before his time; his life is "controlled by his faithfulness to God's redemptive purposes, not by Herod."³ Jesus is obedient.

Everything in the natural world, plants, animals, atoms, everything, obeys the laws of God, the laws of physics, except humans. You won't see a tree being anything other than a tree; it obeys God's plan for trees. You won't find a cat that refuses to behave like a cat; they certainly don't obey humans, but they do obey God's plan for cats.

But we don't. We live as though we are separate from God and all of Creation. We live as though there are no consequences to disobedience. Richard Rohr says, "Unless someone tells us about the Bigger Life or we've had a conscious connection with the deepest

² *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*

³ *New Interpreters' Bible Commentary*, p 232

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ground of our being, we will continue to live as though we are separate from God."⁴

Our Tuesday evening Lenten series helps us find that deeper connection. Howard Thurman's book, *Meditations of the Heart*, gives us specific suggestions on ways to find the island of peace within our souls, to cultivate silence and so discover the will of God⁵ to foster that deeper connection in order to learn obedience.

Obedience is *not* restrictive, but liberating; *not* confining, but joyful. The freedom to choose to follow God's path is a uniquely human gift, no other part of Creation has been given this gift and we show our love for God by choosing to walk in God's ways. We can give God no greater gift than this.

In this season of Lent, this season of penitence, repentance and obedience, do we have the will to live according to another standard rather than that of the world? Will we examine our lives to discern where we have been obedient and where we have not? Will we be honest with ourselves and with God so that we may be transformed and also deemed righteous?

⁴ Richard Rohr's *Daily Meditation* 28 Feb 22

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I pray that we may have the strength and courage to make this journey together and the determination to bring our lives into alignment with God's will for us and all Creation. Amen.

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