

Dear friends in Christ



March 13, 2022, Lent 2

“I Never Promised You a Rose Garden”

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Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Psalm 27; Philippians 3:17-4:1;
Luke 13:31-1-9

I began as a geology major in college, but in my senior year transferred to the psychology department. It seemed, more and more that studying rocks and the eons long ago of tree ferns and dinosaurs had little to do with the real-life problems all around me.

It may have been that the impetus was a search for why my own family was so off the rails. We couldn't seem to get through a dinner without my parents ending up in a big family fight. I was too young to have any idea as to what the underlying issues were. More than once, Dad would just up and threw down his plate, breaking it into smithereens, food flying. Our dog, Skippy running for cover. Then in silence, he'd stomp out of the kitchen. Those of us remaining would quietly finish our dinner and leave the table. As quickly as possible.

I began to get an inkling that there could be some deep, underlying issues when in high school I took Mr. Stowe's psychology class in my senior year. My girlfriend also was taking it and we'd discuss it over lunch.

Mr. Stowe was enamored by the weird behavior one encountered. A good portion of the semester was devoted to what is called “abnormal psychology.” From neuroses to psychoses, we went through quite a menu of aberrant behaviors – paranoia, schizophrenia, narcissism, sociopathy, depression, kleptomania, addiction – the entire gamut of the

bizarre behaviors.

As Mr. Stowe would introduce the psychosis or neurosis of the week, my girlfriend would become very overwrought, wondering if she might have that problem. It usually took me several days to talk her down. “No, you aren’t crazy, we all do that in some small ways.” So, for another week I had her convinced that she probably wasn’t a homicidal maniac or something.

I Never Promised You a Rose Garden was a very in-depth exploration into the limitations of what happens on the psychologist’s couch. It became a best seller as the psychotherapy movement became popular in America in the fifties and sixties. It is the semi-autobiographical novel of a young woman who struggles for years through therapy with mental illness. Her life never becomes perfect. When she complains that it isn’t, her therapist responds that he “never promised her a rose garden.”

That’s what I discovered in my study of psychology. I gained some insight into our family dynamics. No magical reprieve, no rose garden. Our problems were still there.

As my pastoral psychology professor would later tell us, no matter what behavior people may be exhibiting, they’re doing about as good as they can in the moment. So do we all.

Our Covenant with God is, in like manner, not a Hollywood promise of roses and fluffy clouds either. No magical prancing unicorns or instant jackpots. As my son’s tee shirt says, “The lottery is a tax on people who are stupid at math.” Ed McMahon will most likely not be at your mailbox in the morning with your million-dollar check – or on any morning. That’s not the deal. There’s a reason Harrah’s in Las Vegas is bigger than your house. It’s calculated greed. They make their luck. No magic here at all.

“Abram. I am your shield; your reward shall be very great...Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them...I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.”

“As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces [of Abram’s sacrificial offering]. On that day the Lord made a Covenant with Abram.”

What happened in the darkness is an unfathomable mystery. And who can tell about the vision of the smoking pot and flaming sword. All the hoo-ha with the smoking pot and sword is the biblical writer's way of assuring us that this is the Real Deal Promise. "Signed, sealed and delivered."

However this happened, in a dream, a vision, or otherwise, Abram knew that this sealed the deal. He, Sarah, and all their descendants were forever bound to this One, to Being Itself, that had freed them from slavery in Egypt.

Read what follows for Moses and his band of trekkers. This is no picnic. Starvation, thirst, poisonous vipers, mass hysteria and superstition over a Golden Calf, total uncertainty, and enemies. It's all there in Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. And it doesn't stop there. Read through Joshua, Judges and First and Second Samuel. Kings and Chronicles -- down through Jesus and then the early church. This Covenant business is no picnic. BUT you won't be alone. There is guidance and comfort.

Part of this Covenant is the continued revelation of God through those who have become part of the journey. God's goodness to us has been shared by parents, teachers and total strangers.

There's a big dose of realism connected with this Covenant business. For Abraham, God's promise of presence is no magic bullet. Abraham will succumb to the worst sort of behavior. (And don't we all from time to time?!)

Abraham, to save his own skin, tells a foreign king with a big army that, of course, he can have Sarah. She's fobbed off as his sister. "I hardly know her. Isn't she just the 'coffee girl' or something?" And in Genesis he does this, not once, but twice! What a stand-up guy! It's all there in Genesis, chapter 20, verse 1. Read it yourself. And he does a repeat in verse 12 -- she's really my sister. Seriously! What a schmuck!

This is the sort of imperfection, duplicity and fallibility that God has to rely on. Both in Abraham and in the likes of us. That's all God has to work with. Imperfection to the max. No rose garden here.

Our end of the Covenant, our part of the Deal, is not magical theology. When Satan leads Jesus up to the highest pinnacle of the temple and

tells him that if he jumps, God's angels will protect him, lest he dash his little pinkie against a stone, Jesus rightly responds, "Thou shalt not put the Lord thy God to the test." If Jesus is unable to rely on magic, what makes us think we're any better? No magical escape in the last reel.

Just as therapy is not magic, neither is faith. The gift we do receive is insight, courage and vision. We get clarity on what is the right thing to do and what enhances life. And in faith, we step forth.

Definitely, no magic in my college parking lot! I remember carpooling with a Catholic friend, rushing into Cal. State L.A., running late on most mornings. Freeway traffic, atrocious, as usual. By the time we arrived, five or ten minutes late, the parking lots were already full. Ron would begin his prayer, "Hail Mary full of grace help us find a parking place." It hardly ever happened. My mantra was, "Never discount dumb luck." Sometimes we did find a place. Actually, I don't ever remember it working. And when we did find a place, it was way the heck out in the back forty.

Like Woody Allen, I can't bring myself to believe in any deity with nothing better to do than go about finding parking places at a mall in Houston. Or Cal State LA for that matter. Not when children's hospitals and maternity wards in Ukraine are being reduced to rubble by a psychopathic killer.

As sisters and brothers of God's Covenant, this is what we can expect. If we work at it.

We will find companions along the way to share the burden and the sorrows. Those who will rejoice with us when we rejoice. This is playing out all over Ukraine these days. The bloody and broken injured are tenderly aided by total strangers. This is the impulse fortified by what they learned in catechism classes in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. It's the impulse taught by the imam in the mosque or the rabbi of the synagogue they attended. It's in the air of the values of Western Civilization.

Yes, sometimes like Abraham, we will fall short. We, in a moment of moral amnesia, will lose sight of our duty even to those most beloved. But that is the standard to which Divine Wisdom calls us to return. Implanted in hearts and minds of all children of the Covenant.

The Covenant is about Trust. It's like that trust of a young mother in Ukraine who put her young son on a train ride of over one thousand kilometers, all across Ukraine to Slovakia. Amidst the shelling and bombs

in eastern Ukraine, this eleven-year-old boy, Hassan, traveled from Zaporizhzhia and crossed the border into Slovakia.¹

He left with a mother's kiss and hug and the trust that she and her husband had given him the character to make this arduous journey on his own. With a backpack, his passport into which she had slipped a note and with a phone number written in ink on his hand he set out.

The boy's mother, Julia, sent Hassan to the safety of Slovakia to find relatives there while she remained behind to care for an elderly mother unable to travel and his father remained to fight off the Russian army. A tough choice made in the faith that they were doing the right thing to get their boy to safety.

That's how it is with our Covenant with God in Christ. We are given basic instructions, some innate ability, some friends and strangers who assist along the way – and we set out on our journey of life. Also, in faith.

I'm sure amidst the doubt, the loneliness and longing for what he left back home – a love of his parents – this trip was no rose garden. His mother never promised such. Neither does God.

How many tears did this young boy shed as the kilometers passed by through the deep night? How severe the longing for the comfort of his mother's caress? His father's reassurance? All that sustained was a bond of absolute trust between this boy and his parents. In faith, he ventured into the unknown, into a foreign country.

"After completing a solo journey, the 11-year-old was hailed 'a hero of the night' by Slovakian authorities. In a Facebook statement, the Slovak Ministry of Interior said that the boy won over the officials 'with his smile, fearlessness and determination, worthy of a true hero'".²

"Volunteers took care of him, took him to a warm place and gave him food and drink,"

¹ Bhavya Sukheja, "A true hero': 11-year-old Ukrainian Boy Travels 1,000 Km Alone To Slovakia To Escape Russian Attack," *Republic on Telegram*, March 7, 2022.

² Ibid.

“With the piece of folded paper in his passport apart from the phone number on his hand, officials at the border were able to contact his relatives in the capital, Bratislava, and hand him over.”³

The mother profusely thanked the Slovak government and police for taking care of her son. “People with big hearts live in your small country. Please save our Ukrainian children.”

This might well be the plea of that nation to the peoples of the world in this moment.

Like Hassan, we in faith, and in God’s trust in us, embark on the journey of life. We trust, also, at the end, we too will be met with a Big Heart. No rose garden promised, only a Big Heart. That’s the Covenant and the Promise. In Christ’s love it shall be sufficient. Amen.

³ Ibid.