

The Second Sunday in Lent  
Genesis 15: 1-12, 17-18 and Luke 13: 31-35  
February 28, 2010

In the name of the one God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The commercial begins with a famous speed skater zipping up his hood, readying for a race.

The zipper moves up his neck in slow motion.

The video is blue, the music somber.

And then Morgan Freeman's deep and effective voice comes from my television:

"Hours before his race in 88, Dan Jansen's sister, Jane, passed away."

"He had promised her he would win Gold."

Video footage of his race is shown; you see Jansen's whole body slide across the ice and you hear the announcer's voice: "Oh no he falls down"

Freeman continues: "He didn't."

[The video is stilled, we see just the frame that shows Jansen sitting on the ice, legs out before him, head in his hands weeping.]

There is a pause. More somber music plays.

And then we here Freeman's voice again:

"Until six years later."

The somber music has been replaced by cheering.

A smile of relief floods Jansen's face. His hood is unzipped. His hair and emotions are set free. He lifts his hands in victory.

Freeman's voice one last time:

"Then... he skated a victory lap with his daughter...[wait for it...]...Jane."

Seriously bring out the Kleenex.

I was only 13 when Jansen fell during the race in 88. But I remember it clearly. My 13-year-old heart ached for him. More than twenty years later, the commercial reminds me of that heartache and reminds me that none of us had any way of knowing that there was indeed, joy - deep joy - in Jansen's future.

Victory didn't come when Jansen first hoped for it in 1988.

Victory didn't come when he was given a chance to race again four years later.

Victory, for Jansen, must have seemed completely elusive.

I know nothing of Jansen's religious faith, if he claims a faith. But I would assume his faith, if he had any, was taking a beating. And, if not his faith, than surely his patience.

Jansen's story is a good illustration for those of us walking this pilgrim way of Lent.

This is a season and a journey that, if it doesn't try our patience, it at least crystallizes for us the *need* for patience and faithful obedience.

We are waiting, waiting, waiting.

We wait as citizens, for our government to get in gear and tackle health care reform or possibly just finish removing the snow from our neighborhoods.

We wait as expectant parents, for the joys and challenges a new child will bring.

We wait as lovers, for future dreams to be made real.

We wait as friends, for news of how each other are faring in troubling times.

We wait in solidarity with brothers and sisters in Chile, memories from the earthquake in Haiti fresh in our minds.

We wait with faith.

We wait with hope.

We wait.

We wait.

The Lord comes to Abram in a vision.

"Do not be afraid Abram; your reward shall be very great."

And Abram says:

"O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless..."

The Lord leads Abram outside:

"Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them."

And then: "So shall your descendants be."

Abram believed the Lord.

But he and his wife didn't have a child that year.

Or the next.

Or the next.

Or the next.

I could go on.

It wasn't until 15 years later, when Abram, now called Abraham, was nearly 100 years old that he and his elderly wife, Sarah, bore a son.

They had hoped for a son for their entire lives.  
Night after night, years after year, they longed for a son.

Their prayers, as far as they could tell, went unanswered.  
For decades.  
For a lifetime.  
Until the very end...when Abram looked up and saw God's promise written in the heavens.

Abraham and Sarah finally had an heir.

Yet, it was still over 400 years later that Abraham's descendants were led by Moses into the promised land.

Abraham and his descendants knew three things: barrenness, wilderness, and promise.

We can glean lessons from their story as we embark on our own journeys through this often barren and wild life:

Trust God.  
Trust that God will fulfill God's promises.  
Trust that God will be victorious.  
And, most important, trust that the biggest victory the world has ever seen will look more like the worst beating anyone has ever taken.\*

The victor will be mocked, scorned, and rejected, having only desired one thing.

"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 wing."

Even you Pharisees. Even you thieving rulers. Even you murderers.

Even you.

I have desired for you all to share in my victory.  
But you were not willing.

This is a stark image, and has been portrayed by artists throughout the centuries.

There is a mosaic in a chapel on the Mount of Olives, beside the Garden of Gethsemane, the place where Luke says that Jesus prayed so earnestly in his anguish that his sweat became like great drops of blood falling to the ground.

The mosaic is like an Icon in that the large hen's head is encircled in gold. There are seven chicks under her feet. The text of the Gospel is written in a circle around them.

“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.”

These final words “yet you were not willing” are written outside the circle, in a pool of red underneath the chicks’ feet.\*\*

Why were the people of Jerusalem not willing to gather within Christ's protective embrace?  
Why would an all powerful God not just gather them together for their own good?  
Why would God let helpless chicks decide for themselves?

Because God created living beings who have the will and power to engage with God and to be in relationship with God ...if they so choose.

This is God's great desire for us.  
But God will not force us.

Instead he offers us a promise.  
We are not promised little victories when we ask for them. We are promised, however, that we can share in the ultimate victory... if we are willing.

If we are willing to enter into the promise offered. If we are willing to be a party to the covenant God established. The initiative has been taken by God.

And this initiative is mysteriously portrayed in the first reading.

There is a three-year-old cow. A three-year-old goat. A three-year-old ram.  
All are cut in two and each bloody half is placed on one side of a path created between them.

Abram falls asleep.

And then we hear that a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch, two symbols of God, passed between these pieces.

In the ancient rite described here, two parties establish a covenant and must walk between slaughtered animals as a solemn promise to uphold their end of the bargain. The rite says, in effect, that if the parties break their promise they will end up like one of the dead animals.

Here, the Lord alone passes between the bleeding carcasses while Abram sleeps.

And we hear that, on that day, the LORD made a covenant with Abram and all of his descendants.

Abram didn't walk through the slaughter. He is not held to the promise in the same way as God has chosen to be held to it.

The risk of death is God's alone.

Of course God will not break the promise.  
But death comes anyway.

And even in this death we are extended an invitation by God.

Will we trust God?

Will we trust that God will fulfill God's promises?

Will we trust that the worst beating anyone has ever taken is in fact the biggest victory the world has ever seen?

We travel through the wilderness, through barrenness. We wait and wait and wait.

But the path has been marked by a promise. A promise initiated by God.

What is your deepest desire? What is that deep longing of your heart?

During Lent we are invited to rend our hearts and enter into our most fundamental hope.

The path is at times marked by desolation.

But it is also marked by a promise.

Are you willing to accept the promise God extends to you?

Are you willing?

Amen.

\* I have been inspired by Frederick Buechner's sermon entitled the Magnificent Defeat.

\* \* Barbara Brown Taylor preached a sermon on this mosaic in 1986. Also a source of inspiration in this sermon.