

Genesis 15: 1 – 12, 17 – 18  
Philippians 3: 17 – 4:1  
Luke 13: 31 – 35  
2 Lent, Year C.

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### **“How Am I To Know?”**

Our culture has a long history of producing confidence artists, flim-flam men, grifters, scalawags, snake-oil salespersons, and all sorts and kinds of people who promise much and deliver little. And yet we elect them repeatedly to public office or send them money on demand. One of our most famous characters, P.T. Barnum, ran a museum/freak show in New York that was astonishingly popular with as many as 15,000 visitors a day in the years before the Civil War. He was also an elected public figure. He got people to leave the museum by posting a large sign that said, “This way to the Egress.” He also said, “There’s a sucker born every minute.”

Many of us have learned to be very careful with whom and what we trust, especially in recent years. Ironically, the more information there is available through the Internet, cable TV, satellite radio, and all the other electronic devices we have invented in recent years, the less trust seems to exist in the world. The more we demand transparency from our government and corporations, the less we appear to trust them and they seem not to trust us. The more we learn about our politicians, whether they want us to know these things or not, the less we trust them. And some of us appear not to trust God very much these days, either. We want more and better signs of God’s existence and of God’s care for us and for the world. What we seem to get are more disasters, both natural and human-made rather than the wondrous miracles we hear about in Holy Scripture.

But, in our lessons for today, we learn that the ancient ones also had issues with trust. Consider Abram – not yet renamed Abraham. Abram is blessed with a vision from God, a vision that promises greatness to Abram even though Abram is old and still childless. Right in the midst of this vision, right after Abram believes the Lord, Abram asks, “How am I to know that I shall possess it?” This is a man with serious trust issues. Abram is talking directly with God; God has already made impressive promises, and Abram wants even more guarantees; God’s word is insufficient for Abram; he wants the sacred equivalent of cash in hand, something more impressive than God’s word.

So, we learn a little about sacrificial rites in those days – please do not try this at home – splitting animals in two was to symbolize what would happen to the one who broke his promise. With Abram in a deep sleep and in terrifying darkness – symbolic of the sin in which the world was mired, God, in the form of fire and flame – and no it is not that kind of pot nor is it the Olympic torch here – God in symbolic form makes the commitment of a binding promise. Apparently that was sufficient for Abram.

If Abram, having had a dream with God speaking to him but still had trust issues, imagine for a moment the followers of Paul who are struggling to follow this new faith, who are experiencing rejection from family and friends, and who are dying before Christ

has returned and consider the trust issues they must have had. There are false teachers and false prophets out there and they can lead the overly-trusting souls into perdition. Others have made the mistake of thinking they can do anything they want because they are already forgiven and saved. They, too, will be doomed to destruction. Paul claims, somewhat stridently, that trust in Paul and trust in Christ Jesus will bring transformation and glory if his followers but stay the course and not give in to temptation and despair. Do not go looking for the egress.

Our Gospel story is a bit puzzling at first hearing. One might think this is Jesus channeling Clint Eastwood. Is this Jesus telling Herod, "Bring it on?" We might note that Jesus makes a veiled reference to three days – a time period that should suggest what is to come. But Jesus is also being open about the political element in his earthly ministry. The work he has come to do is not only about teaching pretty stories, healing some fortunate followers, and hanging out with his buddies. Jesus is openly predicting the inability of rulers and over-lords to trust in what Jesus is calling them to do and to be. Moreover, Jesus is contrasting their suspicious natures with his own trust in the power and importance of his earthly ministry. Jesus accuses the leaders of Israel of placing their own power and privilege above the long-term needs of Israel. These leaders would rather be in control than be righteous. These leaders are so mired in sin and self-absorption that they would rather perpetuate terrible policies than change them; they would rather collaborate with the hated overlords than care for the people they claim to serve. That sort of thing doesn't happen in the modern world, does it?

But what about us? Where do we trust? Whom do we trust? How will we know that we will possess what God has promised us? How will we know that we can trust anyone or anything? We might look to the earthly ministry of Jesus for a partial answer. Jesus did the work he was called to do in spite of the fact that it was unpopular in many circles, extremely dangerous, and led, eventually, to his crucifixion by the authorities. Jesus challenged so many rules, people, and organizations and did so with charm, humor, gentleness, and charisma. Jesus never backed down on critical issues but never used his power to coerce or force anyone to believe anything. Jesus invited everyone to sit at table and converse and dine with him; to learn from him; to question him. Jesus created trust because he showed complete and unconditional love to all who came near him. Jesus spoke the truth in love to everyone. And Jesus earned every bit of trust by his words and deeds. He was advised to trim his sails, change his message, and slip away from the coming confrontation by those who were sympathetic to his message but feared the power of the government. If Jesus had listened to these well-meaning helpers, acted like they were worthy advisors giving him the results of some over-night poll about his standing, he might have lived longer but he would have lost his ministry completely. In the vernacular of sixties, Jesus was trusted because he walked the walk. Jesus never asked any of his followers to do something he would not do – and do first.

But we are called to build trust amongst ourselves by being worthy of trust. We are called to imitate Jesus as best we may by earning trust from others. We are not to coerce others but invite them into our community of faith. We are to accept people as they are but urge them to right actions for their benefit and contentment. We are to offer

hospitality without regard to reward. We are to speak the truth in love, not to win arguments, but to build up the bonds of friendship and concern so that we might all weather the storms of life.

We are right to be cautious about human promises, the world is still filled with P.T. Barnum's, and an egress is not an exotic bird. We must place our full trust in God's grace and blessing, knowing we are God's children, and then call everyone, including ourselves, to a life predicated on trust in God and trust earned by what we do

God's eternal love and unending trust – don't leave home without it. Amen.