

## *Winning at Life*

1<sup>st</sup> Weekend after the Epiphany – January 7/8, 2006

### Sermon Background Study

*Psalm 1:1-3 (NRSV)*

<sup>1</sup>Happy are those

who do not follow the advice of the wicked,  
or take the path that sinners tread,  
or sit in the seat of scoffers;

<sup>2</sup>but their delight is in the law of the LORD,

and on his law they meditate day and night.

<sup>3</sup>They are like trees

planted by streams of water,  
which yield their fruit in its season,  
and their leaves do not wither.

In all that they do, they prosper.

*Genesis 15:1-6 (NRSV)*

[After promising Abram/Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation through whom all people would be blessed, God comes to Abram to reiterate his promise and to calm Abram's fears.]

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." <sup>2</sup>But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" <sup>3</sup>And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." <sup>4</sup>But the word of the LORD came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir." <sup>5</sup>He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." <sup>6</sup>And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

*It is fitting that we begin our journey through the Bible with the first Psalm. Truly, happy are those who choose God and his way. Today also begins the sermon series, "Winning At All Costs."*

*And the story begins*

One way to grasp the over-arching biblical story is to see it as a five-act play: creation, fall, Israel, Jesus, and the Church. What is so remarkable is that our first week's readings, Genesis 1-17, take us all the way into Act 3.

Genesis 1 and 2 tell the story of the first act. God creates everything and pronounces it good. God creates the humans in God's image and charges them with the stewardship of the earth and all its creatures. God gives the humans a beautiful place to live and to work. God gives the humans each other, husband and wife, one flesh. They enjoy a relationship with God that you and I can only imagine. Act 1 closes on a note of hopeful expectation.

But when Act 2 opens in Genesis 3, a darkness falls across creation. The humans, desiring to be like gods themselves, do the one thing that God has asked them not to do. In their disobedience and distrust, the humans damage terribly their relationship with God. God may have once come to walk with them in the evening, but now there is a gulf so huge that the humans will learn they can never cross it themselves. Further, not only is the relationship between God and the humans damaged, all of creation is distorted by this separation from God, this "sin." Murder enters the picture as Cain kills his brother Abel. Indeed, things get so dark (Genesis 6) that God decides to "uncreate" the whole thing and start over with Noah and his family (Genesis 7-9). But even this fresh start fails. No sooner do the

#### Hagar and Ishmael

(Genesis 16 & 21)

In order to help God along on his promise of a son for Abraham, Sarah sends her servant girl, Hagar, in to sleep with him and give him an heir. By custom, Sarah would have full legal claim to the child.

To no one's surprise, things do not work out well. Hagar conceives but Sarah can not live with the situation and sends the pregnant girl away. An angel tells Hagar to return and she does, giving birth to a boy she names Ishmael, as the angel instructed her. But the strife comes to a head again. Hagar and Ishmael leave for a second and last time. Sarah will give an heir to Abraham herself, Isaac, to whom the covenant will pass.

People who are new to story are often surprised by the blessings God extends to Hagar and Ishmael. In her first encounter with an angel, Hagar is promised that she will be the mother of a great multitude, though her son will live at odds with his neighbors. In the second meeting with an angel, the promise made to Hagar is extended to her son. However, Abraham's covenant is not promised to Ishmael.

An important biblical theme is the pouring out of God's blessings upon those who are not part of the covenant people. Even Cain got God's protection.

humans get off the ark, then they begin to build a tower to the heavens, as if they could get there on their own. Act 2 closes in as much darkness as it opens.

But when the curtain comes up on Act 3, it becomes quickly evident that God is now taking a very different course. God chooses one man, Abraham,<sup>1</sup> and his wife, Sarah, through whom the damage of Genesis 3 will be undone. It will be through them and their descendants that God's creation is to be restored to the Eden of Genesis 1 and 2.

There is one small problem however. Abraham is hardly a likely candidate to be the father of a great nation. He is old. Sarah is equally old and far past her child-bearing years. Even though God has promised them a child, it seems downright laughable that Sarah could have a child. Thus, in today's passage, Abraham bemoans that it seems his heir is to be a servant. One can hardly blame Sarah for taking matters into her own hands, arranging for a servant girl to bear a child for Abraham (Genesis 16).

#### *A life built upon faith*

We can never know why God chose Abraham and not someone else. But as the book of Genesis unfolds, we come to see that Abraham is marked out as God's by his faith. Remember that all this is before Moses, before the Ten Commandments, before the Temple. God's promises to Abraham are largely one-sided. What is happening in and through Abraham is God's work alone.<sup>2</sup> But Abraham's response to God's work in his life is his faith. He trusts God. To paraphrase Genesis 15:6, "Abraham trusted God and Yahweh affirmed him to be right-with-God."

#### The Sign of the Covenant

In Genesis 17, God gives Abraham the rite of circumcision as a sign of God's covenant with his people. All males, including servants and slaves, were to be circumcised. Infants were to be circumcised on the eighth day.

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of circumcision to the Jews. The rite marked them out as different from their neighbors. It was a "badge of membership" in the people of God. In addition to proclaiming that there was only one God, the Jews were those who didn't work one day a week, avoided pork, and circumcised their male children. All this set them apart from the world around them.

Circumcision became a prominent issue in the early Christian church. Since Jesus was a Jew and all the first Christians were Jews, it was a natural question to ask whether a non-Jew (a Gentile) must first become Jewish in order to be a follower of Jesus. Must Christians keep the dietary and Sabbath laws? Must all incoming Gentile males be circumcised?

Acts 15 tells of a conference in Jerusalem of the Christian leaders to take up the question. The council ruled that circumcision was not to be required of Christians. Christians were not to be bound by the food laws or even the Sabbath laws. They could keep the Law if they wished, but it was not required of them.

We desire so much in life. We want to win at life, even as we struggle to learn what winning at life is really all about. But if we accept the biblical claims to be true, if we accept that there is a God who has made us in his image and who is working to restore us and all creation to his vision for us, then all winning has to begin with our creator. This is why Foster et al centered their *Renovaré* Spiritual Formation Bible upon what they call the "with-God life." This is why Paul, when seeking to explain that we are made right with God by our faith and trust, reaches back to the example of Abraham (Romans 4). It is in our trusting relationship with God that any true winning must begin.

#### *At all costs?*

But is there a cost to this winning? Frankly, yes. When God calls Abraham and makes such extravagant promises, he also tells Abraham to leave his home and family to head for a strange land. Abraham was to replace his priorities and expectations with God's priorities and expectations. The same is true for each of us.

We may all be made in the image of God, but we are also Genesis 3 people. There is a darkness that clouds our choices and our ambitions. The desire to be like gods ourselves is very much with us. Thus, living the with-God life can seem unnatural. We don't do things that part of us still wants to do. It would be a mistake to minimize the reality of these costs, to pretend there is no price to repentance. Yet, it is only when our hearts and minds have been reshaped that we can embrace God and God's ways.

<sup>1</sup>Don't get thrown off by the names Abram and Sarai. In the ancient world, names meant something. For example, Jesus means "Yahweh Saves." God changes the names of Abram and Sarai to Abraham and Sarah in keeping with his purposes for them.

<sup>2</sup>There is a rather strange story in Genesis 15. Abraham wants to know that God will keep his promises. So God tells him to make two piles of animal carcasses. In the night, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch (manifestations of God) pass between the piles. In the ancient world, a rite similar to this was done sometimes when two kings entered into a covenant or treaty as a sign of their mutual commitment. But in Genesis 15, only God passes through the two piles. God is committing himself and asking nothing of Abraham. This is a theme that is carried forward through the Bible. If we are to be saved, it must be God and God alone who does the saving.

# *Thru the Bible* Daily Bible Readings

January 8 - 14

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Day 1</b> <b>Genesis 18-20; Psalm 7</b> Sarah laughs at the idea of a child; Abraham negotiates with God for Sodom and Gomorrah; Abraham again lies about Sarah</p>	<p><b>Day 2</b> <b>Genesis 21-23; Psalm 8</b> The birth of Isaac; Hagar and Ishmael are sent away; the sacrifice of Isaac; Sarah dies</p>
<p><b>Day 3</b> <b>Genesis 24-26; Psalm 9</b> The story of Isaac and Rebekah; the birth of Esau and Jacob; Isaac makes the same mistake as his father</p>	<p><b>Day 4</b> <b>Genesis 27-29; Psalm 10</b> Jacob and his mother conspire to steal Esau's blessing and Jacob flees; Jacob's dream; Jacob and Rachel</p>
<p><b>Day 5</b> <b>Genesis 30-32; Psalm 11</b> Jacob marries Leah and then Rachel; they all flee to Canaan; Jacob prepares to meet Esau after 20 years; Jacob wrestles with God!</p>	<p><b>Day 6</b> <b>Genesis 33-36; Psalm 12</b> Jacob meets with Esau; the rape of Dinah; the birth of Benjamin and the death of Rachel</p>
<p><b>Day 7 - Reflection</b></p>	

## Sermon Notes

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### January Book Recommendation

#### *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt*, by Anne Rice

Anne Rice is brave if nothing else. This is the story of Jesus at eight – as told by Jesus! I enjoy Anne Rice’s writing, but I came to the novel pretty skeptical. To my surprise, I very much enjoyed it. She makes no bones about being a devout Christian and lays out her approach to the historical research in an appendix. She found her way to some reliable New Testament scholars, notably N.T. Wright. She does a good job of giving you a sense of what it was like in Judea and Galilee in Jesus’ day. But the parts I liked best were the interiors – what was going on in Jesus’ mind as a young boy. Ms. Rice is Catholic so she has to account for the Catholic belief in Mary’s perpetual virginity. She also moves a few events and dates around to suit her purposes. But don’t let all that put you off. This novel will certainly give you much to ponder and discuss.

#### **Winter Bible Academy starts tomorrow, January 9! Class information and registration is on-line at [www.standrewccl.org](http://www.standrewccl.org) and [www.standrewumc.org](http://www.standrewumc.org)**

Classes include *The Practice of Meditation* (Tuesday evenings with Rev. Kathryn Self), *Introducing the Old Testament* (Monday evenings with Scott Engle), *Confronting the Controversies* (Thursday lunch with Rev. Dough Meyer), *The God Who Saves: Exodus and New Exodus* (available at two times: Monday mornings and Tuesday evenings, with Scott Engle), and *1 Corinthians: By the Grace of God* (Thursday mornings with Frankey Commer)

**This would be a great time to take a Bible Academy class. Please join us!**

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The Bible is largely a book of stories about God, about his creation, and about ourselves. They are stories that beg us to use our imagination. We can enter a story in ways that we could never get into a book of systematic theology. These stories are ours so that, through them, we might come to know God better, to live in a right and loving relationship with him who made us. So, let’s consider a few aspects of today’s stories.

Imagine that you are Abraham and you believe that God has told you to leave everything behind to head for a foreign land. What do you think your reaction would be? How would you even know it was God calling you? How would Abraham know? After all, even hearing voices doesn’t tell us everything – we medicate that! Do you think something remarkable must have happened within Abraham’s heart? How hard must it have been for him to head out? Is this the path to “winning at all costs?”

Even better, imagine that you are Sarah. You are in your eighties and your husband comes home announcing that he is going to have an heir. You might laugh as Sarah did. You might even take things into your own hands like Sarah. How could you trust your spouse enough? How could you trust God enough? In Sarah’s mind, what might this promise cost her?