

Standing

Genesis 15:1- 6 Luke 13:31-35

Preached by Richard Bolin at Culver-Palms United Methodist Church

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Walking, standing, turning, returning, running, singing ... these are the basics of our journey during this season of Lent.

We walk toward the fulfillment of God's vision for creation. We turn away from the ways of the world and toward the correct path. We return to God continually to experience grace and receive assurance. We run as disciplined athletes toward the goal before us. In dark times we sing because the light never goes out.

That is a lot of moving and doing. There is also a time for standing. We stand because God is faithful. We stand in order to be faithful as God is faithful.

Don't just do something – stand there! Stand on the promises of God.

Last week we saw Abraham and Sarah begin walking on a journey, a long journey toward the blessing of creation. Abraham had only gone a little ways on this journey toward the blessing of all creation, when he sought some reassurance. Abraham said to God, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir."

But the word of the Lord came to him... "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them... So shall your descendants be." And Abram believed the Lord."

Through Jesus we have been grafted into Abraham's family. The journey toward the blessing of creation is also our journey. We stand on the same promises.

Standing on the promises of Christ my King,

Through eternal ages let His praises ring,

Glory in the highest, I will shout and sing,

Standing on the promises of God.

Standing, standing,

Standing on the promises of God my Savior;

Standing, standing,

I'm standing on the promises of God.

About fifty years ago George Nelsen volunteered to organize a baseball team at the Omaha Home for Boys. Offers of donations came from many sources. A contractor agreed to build a baseball diamond. There was no shortage of funds. But few were willing to commit any time to the boys. George found a cynical group waiting for him at the first practice session. "How long are you going to be here? A couple of weeks?" George told them he intended to be with them the whole season. They snorted and walked off.

At the first game a ground ball was hit toward the shortstop. It went between his legs. The center fielder should have hustled over to scoop up the ball and throw it to second base. But the center fielder just stood and watched. But the time the shortstop ran into the outfield to recover the ball the batter was at third base. After a long, painful inning, George took the outfielder aside and said, "Hey, you need to back-up the shortstop on a play like that."

"Why should I," he replied. "He missed the ball, not me."

George realized he didn't have a team. It was every boy for himself. He shared his frustration with one of the counselors at the Home. The counselor said, "Let's go for a

walk." Out by the main entrance to the Home the counselor pointed out a young tree. It was unusual in that was leaning into the prevailing Nebraska northwest wind. Then the counselor told George about Tony, the center fielder on his baseball team. Tony's father lived in Omaha, but he felt no love or responsibility for his son. Sometimes he would send a birthday card with a dollar in it. On rare occasions he would call. Tony begged his dad to visit him. When the father replied he was busy that day, Tony said, "How about tomorrow? No? Then, maybe Wednesday?" They went through the days of the week. Finally, his dad said he would come on Sunday. Tony told everyone his dad was going to visit him on Sunday. Saturday night he hardly slept. After breakfast on Sunday morning Tony took up a strategic spot next to this young straight tree, and sat leaning on it waiting for his dad to come. He didn't come in for meals. He didn't come in until it got dark. "My dad must have gotten lost, or maybe he's sick. Maybe it is next Sunday that he is going to visit." All summer long and into the fall, every Sunday, Tony sat leaning on that young tree watching for his dad who would never come. When the days grew shorter and the leaves turned red, falling down as Tony sat and leaned, finally Tony gave up. The other boys called him stupid for believing in his father.

Ever since then, whenever George has seen a leaning tree, he thinks of lonely children, and the importance of being faithful ... keeping our promises. [Adapted from "The Leaning Tree," by George Nelsen in *Storytelling World*, Summer 1995, p. 17]

Standing on the promises that cannot fail,
When the howling storms of doubt and fear assail,
By the living Word of God I shall prevail,
Standing on the promises of God.

Standing, standing,
Standing on the promises of God my Savior;
Standing, standing,
I'm standing on the promises of God.

Jesus promised Jerusalem that he would come to the city when the time was right. Warned that Herod wanted to kill him, Jesus replied, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. ... 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 I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

There is some lament here, as Jesus notes that he will experience rejection in Jerusalem, and he will not be first prophet to whom that has happened. But there is also promise here. Jesus will indeed come to Jerusalem. Jesus will finish the work he has set out to do. He will be a mother hen, protecting his brood from the fox. He will come when the people sing, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." That is a promise.

Those words are chosen carefully, from the end of Psalm 118. Psalm 118 is used in worship at every Passover festival. Jesus is not saying that when you see me coming to Jerusalem I know you are going to start singing, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." Rather he is saying, when you sing that Psalm, which I know you will sing when you observe Passover, that is when you will see me entering Jerusalem. That is when I will come to finish my work. Finishing my work is finishing the journey that Abraham and Sarah started. Neither the threats of Herod nor the power of Rome will

prevent me coming to Jerusalem, and when I do it will be not just a commemoration of Passover, a commemoration of God's deliverance, as once we were delivered from Pharaoh, but a new Passover, a here and now deliverance. I promise you, you will see me in Jerusalem at the time of Passover, and the coming Reign of God will become a reality.

Moses heard the promise of God on Mount Sinai ... "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them." That was a crucial turning point on the journey that Abraham and Sarah began, a turning point that is remembered at the annual Passover observance.

The promise of Jesus is akin to the promise made by the voice emanating from the burning bush. I am coming to deliver my people. Stand. Hold your head up. Trust the promise.

On a day when we might have expected Pilate to enter the city from the West riding a white horse at the head of a column of imperial Roman soldiers, coming to fortify the city during the volatile feast of Passover when the Jews remembered their deliverance from Pharaoh, Jesus entered the city from the east, riding on a donkey, hailed by children waiving branches.

Herod and Pilate promised domination enforced by fear. The people witnessed the promise of Rome when Pilate hung a hundred men on crosses outside the walls of the city, a grim warning to those who did not acknowledge the power of Caesar.

Jesus promises Jerusalem that he will come when the time is right ... the right time to make the deliverance of Passover real again ... the right time to end systems of domination and make real the realm of God. The right time - not to overthrow the Romans - but to make Caesar irrelevant, to answer Pilate's promise of fear with God's promise of love.

Young Tony at the Omaha Home for Boys heard his father promise that he would come on Sunday. He waited for him all day, leaning on that tree. He waited for him Sunday after Sunday, until he gave up.

Jesus promised to come on Sunday ... Palm Sunday. He kept his promise. And despite the worst that could happen, the collusion of the dominant powers of the world to put him away and keep him away, he came again the next Sunday, Easter Sunday. He comes every Sunday and every day. And so we will sing today, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!"

The promise upon which we stand is the fierce love of God that will not let us go. When human relationships fail us, the God of love is still there. When fear and violence threaten us, the love of God will not be moved. When our own flesh and blood is weak, love stays the course, love renews, love never ends.

Standing on the promises I cannot fail,
Listening every moment to the Spirit's call,
Resting in my Savior as my all in all,
Standing on the promises of God.

Standing, standing,
Standing on the promises of God my Savior;
Standing, standing,
I'm standing on the promises of God.