

STICK TO THE PLAN
(Gen. 15:1-12,17-18; Luke 13:31-35)

We all know the saying “Never judge a book by its cover.” But isn’t that exactly what publishers want us to do? Why else would they put blurbs on the back telling us how the book we’re holding will entertain us, inspire us, inform us, make us better people? They do it because they want to convince us to shell out \$25.

But that just shows how dangerous it is to judge a book by its cover. Have you even seen a dust jacket blurb warning, “Save your money, this book is a rip-off. It really stinks!” Of course not. If we just go by the cover, every book deserves a Pulitzer Prize. So what’s the wary book buyer to do?

One thing we do is read reviews. Or we ask friends how they liked it. It’s really kind of flattering to be asked what we think of a book. It means someone trusts our literary judgment and taste.

Now suppose someone asked you, “I’m thinking about buying a Bible. You go to church, tell me, what’s it all about?” Would you be flattered? Or flustered? You might stammer, “It’s about God and Jesus.” “Okay, but they’re characters. What’s the plot, what’s the storyline?” Could you sum it up in 25 words or less?

Verna Dozier can. Here’s how she puts it: the Bible story is all about “the people of God losing the way and a God who will not give up calling them back.” That’s about as succinct as it gets. “The people of God losing the way and a God who will not give up calling them back.”

A caveat, though: Please, please don’t go away thinking that now you know everything you need to know about the Bible so there’s no point in actually reading it. That would be like deciding you know everything you need to know about *Moby Dick* because someone tells you it’s the story of an obsessed sea captain trying to catch a white whale. Of course that’s what it’s about, but there’s so much more to it. The Bible is about “the people of God losing the way and a God who will not give up calling them back,” but there’s a lot more to it than that.

Gabe and Dot Fackre in their little book *Christian Basics* say, “In the beginning, God had a dream....But reality shatters the dream...[God’s people turn away] This is not what God wanted!...The dream, though, will not die...God’s long-suffering Love will not let us go” (p. xi). And so the story unfolds with all its twists and turns, false starts and restarts.

It all begins with a plan and a purpose, with a God who loves all of creation and who only asks to be loved in return. But here’s the rub: God made some creatures with free will. God gave them freedom so they could choose to love God or not. And most chose not to. So right away it looks as if God’s plan might be derailed, that God’s purpose might be thwarted. And at least once, the story says, God came this close to giving up, this close to saying “Let’s forget the whole thing. I’ll just send a flood and wipe everything out.” And that would have been the end of the story – except for one righteous man named Noah.

God saves Noah and his family and starts over. But humanity goes right back to its old ways, so God decides to try something different. God finds another righteous man – Abraham – and sets up an experiment. Maybe a special relationship with one chosen people will turn the world around. Maybe a special relationship with one chosen people in turn will bless the whole world. And that's where we pick up the story today in the book of Genesis.

We could go on and talk about the history of Israel and how the people strayed away and how the prophets warned them to turn back. In some ways it's a pretty repetitive, pretty dreary story. But you get the picture. The people of God lose their way time after time after time, but God always refuses to give up. God will try whatever it takes.

One dictionary definition of God is "a being conceived as the perfect, omnipotent, omniscient originator and ruler of the universe." That suggests a God who is unchangeable, all knowing, and all powerful – a God who knows everything and controls everything. I said last week that when someone says "God," we always have to ask "What God?" Verna Dozier and Gabe and Dot Fackre aren't talking about God as the dictionary defines God. The dictionary God wouldn't have to worry about people losing the way. The dictionary God wouldn't have a purpose that could be thwarted by humanity, and wouldn't allow it to be thwarted in any case. The dictionary God would make sure everything goes strictly according to plan.

There's another way to think about God, though, a way that's closer to the God we actually find in the Bible. Suppose we think about God as *responsive love*. Human nature makes us fairly predictable. We can be counted on to mess things up as often as not. But free will means God can't control our choices. All God can do is try to persuade us, and when persuasion fails and we choose something else, all God can do is respond in love.

Jesus is God's ultimate loving response. Last Sunday we saw Jesus being tempted to use his power in ways that might be called diabolical, since it was the devil trying to make him do it. Jesus turned the devil down cold, not because the temptations were bad things in themselves, but because God had other plans. And Jesus is going to stick to God's plan no matter what.

In today's lesson we see how Jesus sticks to that plan. He's on his way to Jerusalem, knowing full well what awaits him there. When those well-meaning Pharisees warn him away, he could have decided this might be a good time to take a vacation to a spa on the Dead Sea. But not Jesus. He's not going to be deterred.

Martin Luther King called love "the most durable power" and said that "standing up for the truth of God is the greatest thing in the world." "This," he said, "is the end of life. The end of life is not to be happy. The end of life is not to achieve pleasure and avoid pain. The end of life is to do the will of God, come what may" ("The Most Durable Power," in *A Testament of Hope*, p. 10).

He lived out that conviction when his house was bombed with his wife and daughter in it. When he got home from the meeting he was at, there were 500 to 1,000 people gathered in the street. Many of them were probably seething with hate. Martin Luther King had a choice. He could have unleashed

an angry mob on the city of Montgomery. But he didn't. Instead, he chose the path of nonviolence. He urged the people to continue to show love, to continue the struggle with dignity and discipline.

We've all heard or read Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. His dream was in harmony with God's dream. King believed that the universe is on the side of justice. That belief empowered all that he did in the struggle for civil rights. That belief empowered all those unnamed thousands who refused to be deterred by threats and violence, who didn't back down even when some of them were beaten or killed.

They were following the example of Jesus, who doesn't back down or run away, not because he knows he's safe – just the opposite! – but because he knows who God is and what God's plan is.

Jesus shows us a new way when he rejects what the world calls power and shows us the meaning of true power redefined in terms of love. That is the Jesus who accompanies us on our Lenten journey and on every path that we would rather not tread, every path that leads us to places we would rather not go, every path that fills us with dread. That is the Jesus who, faithful to God's plan, accompanies us no matter what we confront along the way.