

Montague Pastoral Charge

March 16, 2025 – Second Sunday in Lent

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18, Luke 13:31-35

Sermon: “The Sextant”

Timothy Wisnicki

68°39'30" south by 52°26'30" west. Those were the final latitude and longitude co-ordinates of HMS *Endurance* as recorded by Frank Worsley. Worsley was the captain of Sir Ernest Shackleton's famous and ill-fated expedition, and those were the co-ordinates, off the coast of Antarctica in the Weddell Sea, where on Nov. 21, 1915 the ship finally went down.

You might remember three years ago when the shipwreck of the *Endurance* was found on the ocean floor, 3 km under. The footage of the discovery is spine-tingling; the ship looks just as it did when it went down, the icy waters have preserved it so well. The discovery prompted a renewed interest in Shackleton's career, and just a few months ago his final ship, *Quest*, was found off the coast of Labrador.

On the *Endurance*, Shackleton and his crew had set out to achieve what they saw as the last great feat of polar exploration: to cross Antarctica. But before they even made it to the continent, the unpredictable pack ice in the Weddell Sea closed in on their ship and trapped them. For weeks they worked tirelessly to clear the ice away from the vessel but they couldn't compete with the massive force. The ship was one of the strongest wooden boats in the world; with a keel 85 inches thick, the *Endurance* was built to break ice. But in the end even she couldn't compete. The ice crushed the hull and she went down, leaving the 28 men utterly stranded. What began as a quest for glory quickly became a fight for survival. The expedition was well documented by Frank Hurley the photographer, so you can still see the tragic images of the ship in her final days on the ice. There's one haunting picture of Captain Worsley beside the stranded ship, making some last observations of the stars with his sextant and steadfastly checking the calibration of their clocks to determine their longitude. You can see him there in the dark, kneeling on the ice, turning the dial to swing the mirror and bring the tiny light of a star down to the horizon. He would record the angle, consult the charts and clocks, make some calculations, and know where they were. Behind him the photograph shows the stern of the ship with the name “Endurance” emblazoned on the hull with the logo of a bright metal star below it. It's as if one of the stars the Captain was sighting really had been brought down from the sky and fixed on their boat.

“The Lord brought Abram 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.’ We heard, in Genesis, the story of God's covenant with Abram and Sarai, the childless old wanderers who were called out of their home to be the parents of a people that would bear witness to the living God. When Abram doubts on a dark night how this promise can possibly be kept when he has no child, God leads him out of the tent and directs his gaze upward. “How many are there? Can you count them? That is how many descendants you will have.” And in the face of that beautiful impossibility, Abram believes. He believes that he and Sarai will have a legacy – that God's purpose for him will endure.

I've always been fascinated by the great polar explorers. Not just because of their skill and daring, but also because of their spirituality. When you set out to the far north or south, to cross hundreds of miles of ice in the most hostile conditions imaginable, there can only be three reasons. First, for the wonder of seeing and mapping unseen parts of the world. Second, to prove something about yourself, and about humanity in general – to show the world what we are capable of if we have enough vision and grit. And third, you go to the pole to meet God. When Shackleton's men had to abandon the ship and pack light, he tore out one page of the Bible to take with him, from the Book of Job: "Out of whose womb came the ice? And the hoary frost of Heaven, who hath gendered it? The waters are hid as with a stone, And the face of the deep is frozen." When you're out there on the icy seas with no other living thing in site, alone beneath the yawning heavens, you must feel confronted with the Divine. Your mind must turn to the big questions: the meaning of everything. In Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, the final encounter between Frankenstein and the creature he has made takes place in the Arctic – I'm sure she chose that setting for the same reason. Because out there on the ice, it's just you and your creator looking at each other across a gap of bitter winds. You see just a fraction of the trillions of stars above, and you wonder what it's all for. How tiny I am! Why am I here? What significance can we possibly have in such an unfathomably big universe?

But God makes a covenant with Abram on a dark evening, and makes it perfectly clear how significant we are. God points Abram's eye to the stars, and the whole cosmos becomes a sign of the promise that the God and the human make that night. It's as if Abram is looking through a sextant: God swings the mirror and brings the stars down to the horizon. Heaven and earth meet on that lonely hillside; God makes a covenant and the stars kiss the earth.

It's a very ancient passage that describes this strange covenant ceremony. The ritual involves sacrificial animals, cut in half to symbolise the two parties in the covenant and link them in a sort of blood pact. And then a mysterious flame appears and moves between the two sides, filling in the gap with weird fire. It's a mesmerising scene as the two covenant partners sit across from each other: Abram on the one side and the Lord God on the other, each considering the other. It's a very anthropomorphic vision of God, sitting there opposite Abram; there's a shocking intimacy with the Creator here. But that's what covenant is: the two parties invested in each other; they each freely come into this promise and form a bond with each other, just like couples do when they promise, "For better, for worse." And just like a marriage, and just like when children pinky-swear, or "cross their heart and hope to die," there has to be a ritual for a sacred, intimate bond like this.

No wonder a terror suddenly grips Abram as the fire passes between the partners. This is dangerously close to the Divine; he's actually making a blood-pact with the Creator! It doesn't get any more dangerous than that. The stars have come to earth and brought all their fire with them. The creator and the creature face each other and make a promise, not in some higher sphere of mystical thought, but right there on a chilly hillside by a campfire. The God who freely gives on a level with the man who freely trusts. At this point the covenant has no conditions: Abram doesn't have to give anything on his side; all he has to do is to believe in this promise God is fulfilling for him.

It's all very ancient, this blood and fire. Very "Old Testament," we might say, but we see the same intimacy of the covenant in our gospel reading too, as Jesus laments over Jerusalem: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often

would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” Jesus takes on the voice of the God of Israel, and his words are full of echoes from the Scriptures. He uses the old image of God as the mother bird, spreading her wings with fierce love to protect her children who insist on wandering off and doing themselves harm. It’s the same idea: the covenant where the two parties are inextricably linked together like a mother and her young. And there’s the same conflict of wills. Two parties with a gap in between: God wants to gather us in, and we equally and oppositely want nothing of the sort. We have our freedom to pull away from the covenant as little chicks do when they jump into the water trough, but God has God’s freedom, and God holds tight to us, keeps gathering us in and protecting us from ourselves.

When the *Endurance* went down, Shackleton saw at once that he had a new mission: he would ensure that every single one of his men made it home. That became his fanatic desire, the only thing he cared about. Because they had a covenant together; he was their commander and they were his men. It’s said that one minute Shackleton would be the stalwart leader standing at the prow of the boat, the next he would turn around and be the mother hen to his crew, making a hot drink and comforting them. He had his finger on the pulse of each man in case one started to show signs of giving out. What kept them going was not just the strength of his leadership but the strength of his promise – the strength of the covenant. When every muscle in your body and every neuron in your brain tells you to just give up, it’s the *promise* that keeps you going. “I’m not alone in this, I’m committed to something and someone that’s bigger than myself.”

And so, in the face of the harshest conditions, they managed to row the ship’s lifeboats off of the ice and across the sea to Elephant Island. They set up camp there, living off seal and penguin meat. But Shackleton knew that no other ship would come to this barren island to rescue them. The only way to survive was to fit out one of the boats for an ocean journey and try to sail all the way to the island of South Georgia, 800 miles away. So, he and five others left the rest of the crew to winter at the camp, and set off. It was a desperate journey; the force of the wind and the size of the waves were immense for any vessel, let alone a 22-foot converted lifeboat. Navigation was extremely difficult; two men would have to hold up Captain Worsley and try to keep him steady as he looked up at the sky with his sextant and tried to distinguish the horizon between the stormy sky and sea. But his measurements were true, and after two weeks they finally battled their way through a hurricane to land on the southern shore of South Georgia.

To a navigator like Captain Worsley, the stars are not just distant balls of burning gas; they *mean* something. They would be constant companions – steady guides reassuring you, even on a barren sea, that you *are* somewhere, and you are part of something. They would be the only sign of order above the chaos of the empty sea. The constellations would be faithful and familiar friends, breaking the monotony of the wilderness and testifying to direction and purpose in creation.

It was the same way for Abram. When he gazed up at the sky, God showed him how the stars were not just silent lights; they *meant* something. And not just anything; each star indicated one of Abram’s descendants: one of the people of the covenant. This means that the heavens speak of God’s faithfulness, not in a vague, general way, but very specifically. For Abraham, they corresponded to God’s relationship with him and his family. The theologian Karl Barth believed that the covenant – God’s promise to the world, running through Noah, Abram and Sarah, down through King David and crowned in Jesus – is the “internal basis of creation.” What

he means is that God's free love, pledged to us in the covenant, is the ground and goal of *everything*. God doesn't decide to make the world and then decide to make a covenant; God chooses from eternity to be a God *for* us, to be in covenant with the creature, and the whole creation is the unfolding of that love. Covenant comes first. Nothing just exists, everything exists *meaningfully*. Heaven and earth exist so that, one day, heaven can come down to earth – so that the mirror can swing and the stars can touch the land. From the rocks on Elephant Island to the most distant galaxy – all of has been made so that God can have people to love and protect like a mother hen, and so reveal the glory of God's love. To put it another way, I used to work at a church in Toronto where they had the same Christmas pageant every year. The script begins with a question from the narrator: "Have you ever imagined that this world is a promise being kept?"

When we're out underneath the stars on a barren sea – even if it's just the barrenness of Lent or a hard season of our lives – the big questions will always start to ask themselves. Why are we here? Why is there something rather than nothing? Why did God create? And what if we have an answer to those questions? What if there is something rather than nothing precisely so that God could sit by a campfire one night and make a promise with a man called Abram? What if the sun and moon and stars run their courses so that a tribe of people could keep that promise and show it to the world? What if the reason we exist at all is so that a carpenter from Nazareth could one day embody and fulfil that promise of love? In other words, what if we silly chicks are so dear to God the Mother Bird that it was worth making a Big Bang to create us? What if this world is a promise being kept?

The last great challenge of Shackleton's expedition was to cross the island of South Georgia. The six men had made it to the south shore, but someone needed to cross the island on foot to the north shore where there was a whaling station. So Shackleton and the two other strongest men set out across the treacherous snowy cliffs, which no one had ever crossed before. Tired, exhausted, and emaciated, it nearly killed them. At one point they dug a hollow to rest in, but Shackleton couldn't let his friends sleep for more than five minutes, because he knew that sleep in those conditions would turn into death. Finally, after 36 hours of straight marching, they made it to the station. From there, Shackleton was able to mount a rescue mission for the three men on the other side of the island and for the 22 who were left back on Elephant Island – they had been left for four months and had nearly abandoned all hope. As the rescue ship approached the island, Captain Worsley recalled Shackleton anxiously scanning the horizon with his binoculars, counting the silhouettes until he cried out with an exultant shout, "They're all there, skipper! They're all safe!" Like a mother hen, he had gathered them in.

Later, Shackleton recalled the final harrowing journey across South Georgia. He wrote, "I know that during that long and racking march of thirty-six hours over the unnamed mountains and glaciers of South Georgia it seemed to me often that we were four, not three. I said nothing to my companions on the point, but afterwards Worsley said to me, 'Boss, I had a curious feeling on the march that there was another person with us.' Crean [the third man] confessed to the same idea." Shackleton doesn't say any more about that fourth person. But again: the third reason you go down to Antarctica is to meet God.

I hope that our own challenges won't be as intense as Antarctic survival, but whatever this season of the world brings, I hope we will notice that other person along the way. May we all discover that, even in the barrens, we are walking with the same presence that walked with Shackleton and Worsley and who sat across the fire from Abram – the Force whose covenant of

love created us, and who is quietly, lovingly, and fiercely keeping the promise: to guide us, shelter us, and gather us home.