

The rectory back porch needed repair a few months ago. At the time we didn't know if winter storms would be harsh or mild, but we decided we'd better get to work on it just in case. We got it fixed in time. Last month I put a notice in the bulletin that the cost of the materials came to \$1100, and if anyone wished to pay for that as a gift to the parish, we would all be grateful. Well, several donors stepped forward, and they all had this in common: They each gave over \$1000, and they each wanted to remain anonymous. Because of these gifts, we've decided to do some other repairs to the rectory that we'd put on hold because of other budgeting priorities here. There are many other examples of people in this parish who cannot give a monetary gift that size, but who do give their time and talent to assist our worship and to serve the community. They don't want it public. All they want in return is for us to be church.

It seems like an unequal bargain, but that is precisely the kind of bargain the Book of Genesis describes in today's first reading. In the covenant, God makes two promises to Abram: Abram will have land, and he will have descendants as numberless as the stars. This conversation started at night under a pollution-free sky, and when you see the sky without any ambient light getting in the way, you know there are a lot of stars up there; it's a big promise. Genesis says "Abram put his faith in the Lord," and although this may not seem like much to put onto the bargaining table, it is all that God wants in return. God wants to be the center of our life, and this is what faith does. It orients our thoughts and acts in a much bigger way than otherwise possible. Without faith we focus a lot on ourselves and less on the world. God desires our faith not just for himself but for all of creation.

God and Abram held a ceremony to seal this covenant. After this nighttime conversation, Abram brought the animals God requested: a heifer, a she-goat, a ram, a turtledove and a young pigeon. Abram split the four-footed animals up the middle and arranged the birds on either side. When he got everything ready, birds of prey tried to feast on the carcasses, but Abram scared them off. He did this all the next day; he went into a trance as the sun was about to set again, and, Genesis says, "terrifying darkness enveloped him." Then when it was dark again, God appeared as a fire pot and a flaming torch and passed between the pieces of animals. That sealed this unequal covenant between one man and the God who made him.

I'm always struck by the birds of prey in this story. At this solemn moment when God reveals the eternal covenant to Abram, you'd think that the ceremony would go on without any blemish. Abram certainly wanted everything to look right on his end of the deal, but he had to spend all day in the clumsy task of shooing away vultures. Sometimes our gifts go this way: we have every intention of showing how generous we are to someone who is being generous to us, and it doesn't come out as pretty as we imagined it would. But in a real covenant it does not matter. Whatever the gift looks like, it will always seem equal, huge, appropriate and beautiful, when it is given with all the heart.