

“Promise”

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3-17-19

Based upon Genesis 15; 2 Peter 3:8-15

Last week in my sermon, which Dottie LaPenta very graciously and helpfully gave voice to in my absence, I said that when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, he was tempted by scarcity to want more, by impatience to want his needs to be met instantaneously, and by opportunities to put his needs over humanity's, to deny his God-given identity and calling. Jesus was able to resist all of these temptations, but we do not usually fare as well when we are in wilderness times of our own. Perhaps that is why, after inviting us to observe Jesus in the wilderness last week, the Lectionary did not think it redundant to take us back to the wilderness again this week. This time, however, the Devil isn't the source of testing, God's timing is, and this time, instead of watching Jesus succeed without seeming to break a sweat, we get to see Abram, the founding father of our faith, struggle as well as succeed. We also get to see how God responded to his struggles in way that allowed Abram to move forward in faith. Recognizing this, we are better equipped to do the same when we find ourselves trapped in a wilderness of waiting, yearning for God's promises to come true.

Walter Brueggemann and many other Old Testament scholars consider *Genesis* Chapter 15 to be “pivotal for the Abrahamic tradition,” and “probably the most important chapter of [the] entire collection.”¹ But when you first hear or read this chapter, it can sound more overwhelming than enlightening. As a wise young man I know said to me this week, “There's too much stuff in there.” He's right. We have inheritance anxiety and star shows, land possession anxiety and a show of chopped-up animals, a nightmare about Abram's descendants being enslaved for 400 years, and a vision of a fire pot and flaming torch floating through the dead animals' parts somehow ensuring Abraham's as-yet non-existent descendants inherit practically half of the Middle East. It can all be quite confusing, which makes it harder to see what, if anything, Abram's experience has to do with our own.

So, let's back up for a minute to get the big picture first. All of this began in Chapter 12, with Abram and Sarai, two seventy-somethings originally from the territory we now call Kuwait, being called by Yahweh to leave everything they knew to travel west into an unknown land in order to receive a blessing, and be a blessing. The Bible doesn't say why God picked Abram for this call. In an attempt to provide an answer, Jewish Midrash tells a story about a young Abram breaking his father's idols and then making another idol appear responsible for the massacre,² suggesting that God perhaps appreciated his sense of humor as well as his faithfulness. But all the Bible says is that God called and Abram obediently followed.

We don't know why Abram did such a brave thing any more than we know why God called him. Maybe he craved adventure, or wanted to see more of the world before he died. It

¹ Brueggemann, Walter, *Genesis, Interpretation A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 140.

² See *Abraham and the Idols* at <https://www.ourjewishcommunity.org/learn/midrashim-legends/abraham-and-the-idols/>

seems likely, however, that his reasoning had to do at least in part with God's promise that his offspring would inherit the land the Lord would show him. You see, Abram and Sarai had a barrenness problem. It wasn't just that they were too old to conceive when God contacted them; even when they were younger, children had proven to be an impossibility for them. Infertility is a crushing blow for people today as well. But in their day, it was even worse because producing an heir mattered more than anything to their social standing and property ownership. So their sense of identity, their whole lives had been marked by this failure.

They hit the road with God trying to shake this woundedness, and soon got to see the Promised Land, and have all kinds of adventures both good and bad, in Egypt, in the Negev with Abram's nephew Lot, and in battle, saving Lot from kidnappers. But no miraculous baby appears. So now, three chapters later, when God reiterated that they would be rewarded, Abram was far less enthusiastic. "What good is a reward," he basically said, "when the only person who will be able to enjoy it is the slave I'll have to designate as my beneficiary when I die?" "Oh, that guy's not going to be your heir," God said, "You will have your own child." Then taking him out to look at the stars, God added for effect, "you will have as many descendants as these." Floored by this reminder of God's vast creative power, Abram did something he's been celebrated for ever since, "He believed God," even though time was passing and the baby dream was still against all odds. Abram believed, the text says, "and it was reckoned to him as righteousness."

This chapter is considered hugely important in part because of this line. Paul, James, and the author of *Hebrews* all lift up the significance of Abram's faith, as does our Reformed theology. Abram believed he was saved by God's grace, through faith. That is important for us to know. But it's also important, in my opinion, for us to recognize that that famous line appears in verse 6 of this chapter. There is so much more to this chapter after 6, and so much more to the overall story of Abram called the "Abraham cycle," than this one moment of clarity.

For example, we see in the rest of the chapter that Abram wasn't done asking questions and doubting, and God wasn't done responding. No sooner did Abram believe, then he had to raise another question which had been bothering him about God's promise: how would he know that he and his descendants would get the land? God answered this second question with a sacred ritual instead of a show of power. In those days parties to a contract didn't just sign a document to seal a deal. They literally "cut a covenant" by sacrificing animals. Once animals were slaughtered, they were cut in two, and laid out on the ground so that a little aisle separated the halves. Then the parties to the contract would walk down the aisle, effectively signifying, "May I be cut in half like these sacrifices if I break this promise." In this passage, however, God does not ask Abram to walk between the halves. Only God does, in the form of floating fire. This is the second reason why this chapter is so critical. God makes a *unilateral* eternal promise to Abram: "You want assurance that your descendants will get the land. Here's your assurance: I promise." Then God gives Abram not just the promise, but also a glimpse of it being fulfilled. "Your descendants will have to experience 400 years of slavery first," God says in the dream, "but they will get the land."

Now personally, if I had that dream, I think I might have awakened with more doubts than confidence. Four hundred years for God's promise to come true?! That's a long wait, one that clearly rules out the possibility of Abram seeing it happen himself. And what about all that suffering? It raises for me theodicy issues and issues about determinism and free will. It would have made me wonder if the whole plan was really worth it at all. But in the Abram story, this dream, which scholars believe was added to the story later during the Babylonian exile, long after the dream of slavery and exodus had come true, reveals only one thing to Abram: when God makes a promise, God keeps a promise. It may take a whole lot longer than you would ever imagine, but that doesn't mean God has reneged on the deal. Faith means trusting and believing that in God's time, the promise will be fulfilled.

In effect, Abram learned what Peter affirmed in today's epistle lesson, that God's sense of timing is very different from our own. But even though Abram believed in this chapter, he still struggled with the uncertainty of the wait. The very first verse of Chapter 16 states that the barrenness problem persisted, so much so that instead of waiting Abram decided to take the matter in his own hands and speed up God's timing by having a baby with Hagar. This prompted God to bless Ishmael, but affirm that he wasn't the son God had been talking about. It prompted God to reaffirm the covenant again, this time by having Abram circumcise himself and Ishmael so he will remember that God's promise is sure. Basically, God and Abram go back and forth and back in forth for chapters on this issue. Isaac doesn't appear until Chapter 21 when Abram and Sarai are practically dead; they are so old. They spend nine chapters haunted by barrenness, and alternatively encouraged and frustrated by the delayed promises of God.

What can we learn from this, besides the fact that God's timing is different from our own? I think we can learn from Abram's struggle as much as from his great faith. We, too, are trapped in barrenness, if not in the literal sense of infertility, then at least in the sense that we are not yet living in the time when the promises of Christ – the promise of peace and love for all people, the promise of the kingdom of God being visible on earth, the promise of the weak being blessed and evil being squashed, and crying and tears being things of the past – remain unfulfilled. We are also living in a time when reading the paper, or watching the news, can magnify that sense of barrenness until the promises seem like impossible dreams. It is hard under these circumstances to trust in what we cannot see. So how do we, like Abram, keep moving forward in faith?

I think in order to do that, we need to recognize a few things. First, faith does not require the absence of doubt. As Carolyn Arends wisely observes in her book Wrestling with Angels, "To have real faith – faith that hopes for things that are not yet seen – we have to at least occasionally be confronted with a keen and painful awareness of just how unseen some of those things are."³ Abraham, the founding father of our faith, the one celebrated for thousands of years, doubted all the time. His doubts made him question God, and try to engineer his own reward in a variety of ways. But God did not give up on him. God did not punish him either. Every time Abraham freaked out or despaired, God worked to bring blessings out of his mess, and then

³ Arends, Carolyn, Wrestling with Angels: Adventures in Faith and Doubt, (Eugene: Harvest House Pub., 2000), 217.

reaffirmed the promise. This is what God does with us too through the Holy Spirit. There isn't a moment on most people's journeys of faith when they can affirm belief in such a way that they never doubt again. Most of us go back and forth and back and forth as Abram did between solid belief and reasonable doubt. This is OK. It's normal. It's something God understands about us.

Second, the reason we believe notwithstanding the haunt of barrenness, the reason we can trust in the promises' fulfillment, notwithstanding their lack of fulfillment now, is that God has promised they will be fulfilled. That's what this chapter is about as much or more than Abram's faith. God promises unilaterally to bless us, save us, and give us a future with hope. The promise is not contingent on our obedience, any more than it is contingent on our timing. It is grounded in *God's* nature, not our own. When God makes a promise, God keeps a promise. Our trust, therefore, is not based upon seeing the promise fulfilled; it is based upon what we know about the one who made it.

Knowing this, the third lesson from this story, I think, is that when you journey in faith, you have to recognize that even though the promise is not yet fulfilled, you are still a piece of it. Abram believed, and because he did generations of his descendants have been able to do so too. Abram kept on walking with God, and because he did, we still are. We may not see the kingdom of God fully realized in our lifetimes. But we can grow into it nevertheless. We just ritually acknowledged this truth with Mikey Tibbit's baptism. He was marked as Christ's own, as a participant in the promises of Christ without doing a thing. He didn't need to believe first in order to receive God's grace because the grace is a gift. But his baptism marks the beginning of a journey which, with the help of God's grace, will lead him step by step closer to the promise for the rest of his lifetime. Like the animal sacrifice ceremony and circumcision, baptism is sign God has given us to remind us of the promise. As long as we live toward the promise, we have hope, and as long as we live in the promise, we will not be living in barrenness, not really. We may be living in barren times, but we will carry the fruits of the Spirit which fill our world with grace and love with us now. They will carry the promise forward until its completion.

The poet Rilke once advised, "be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves. Then gradually you will live into the answers."⁴ Every day the state of our lives or our world may raise questions in our minds about who we are and who we're called to be, and questions about God and God's faithfulness. It's OK to have questions, and it's OK to have doubts. But don't be tempted to give up on God because you do. Remember that true faith isn't grounded in having all the answers, it's grounded in the knowledge that God keeps God's promises. So, let us journey forward in faith, living into those promises with our lives. Like Abram, let us live into the answers, trusting that God's timing is better than our own, and for the benefit of generations to come. Amen.

⁴ As quoted in Coffin, William Sloane, Letters to a Young Doubter, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), Preface, 1-2.