

Sunday, March 13th, 2022
Lent 2

God's Covenant with Abram

¹⁵ After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." ² But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?"^[a] ³ And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." ⁴ But the word of the LORD came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir." ⁵ He brought him 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." ⁶ And he believed the LORD; and the LORD^[b] reckoned it to him as righteousness.

⁷ Then he said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess." ⁸ But he said, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" ⁹ He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." ¹⁰ He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. ¹¹ And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

¹² As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. ¹⁸ On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.

In the ancient Middle East, long before written contracts, legal documents and so forth, and long before Judge Judy, Court TV, and all the other legal shows we see on TV these days, covenants, promises were made and sealed by animal sacrifice. Animals such as birds, small calves, and the like were often used in these ritual covenant ceremonies. Think of sacrificial lambs, or the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

There was a custom whereby covenants, contracts were made and sealed by cutting animals in two and placing the two halved pieces apart from one another, creating a path in which the two parties could enter into. Animals like birds, or larger animals, depending upon the nature of the covenant to be entered into. The severed halves of the animals were placed just far enough apart so that each party in the covenant, the party of the first part, in the legalese, and the party of the second part, could pass between the two halves of the severed animals. It was a path so to speak for promise making...for covenant making. A place where each party would meet, face one another, and come to an agreement. Each party of the covenant would start at one end or the other of this little journey, and walk from opposite ends between the animal pieces, passing each other in the middle, and ending up, where the other person had started.

And as they passed one another on this little journey between the animal pieces, as they met in the middle they would face one another and agree and take a solemn covenant or promise for whatever it is that they had agreed to. And they further agreed that they themselves would be cut in half like the animals if they failed to keep up their end of the covenant. For centuries, weddings took place in this manner. The bride and groom, along with their families, would gather between these severed animal parts and meet one another in the middle, and take their solemn vow to love and comfort one another. So you wanted to make sure that not only did you make a promise that you knew you could keep, but also, you made sure that you kept your end of the deal, or soon, there would be two of you.

Ever hear of the term “the blood of the covenant”? Well, this is where that term originated. The blood shed by the sacrificed animals sealed the covenant or promise made by the parties in the middle. Later on, in Jesus, God goes beyond God’s original covenant with humanity to offer up God’s most precious Son, as a sign of this “new covenant” with creation. God loved, and loves, humanity so much.

And so with that background we arrive at our first reading today, in Genesis Chapter 15. God had already made a covenant with Abraham, making him a wealthy man with lots of possessions, a big farming business, lots of hired hands, longevity, freedom from his enemies, all the signs to a good Jew that God had looked favorably upon him already. And yet Abram and Sarai were missing the one thing that may have been most important to them at the time, and that was offspring. A family. Children. Just one more tangible sign of God's richest blessings. After all they were both getting along in years.

And so we enter into this conversation between God and Abraham today in this covenantal meeting, with God on the one hand promising Abraham blessings beyond imagination to him and his family, at a future time, yet to be determined by God. And Abraham on the other, bringing all of his doubts and questions about what God can and will do for him right here right now. Because Sarai's biological clock was ticking. Abraham brings a questioning and wavering faith to God because of his having no offspring and is wanting God to answer his prayers here and now. “Show me, God”, Abraham says to God. And God who covenants with Abraham that indeed Abram and Sarai will be parents of many offspring.

I think Abram’s story is also our story - people of faith who try often unsuccessfully to respond faithfully to God even though they aren't always believing or trusting that God will deliver on God's promises. People like us who believe and yet doubt; people who waver and whose faith waffles, people who question this whole God thing sometimes. “Where are you, God, in the midst of such suffering in the world” we ask, as we watch a catastrophe unfold before our very eyes in Eastern Europe, as well as right here at home, and even in our own daily lives sometimes. People who are in the midst of uncertainty about life We are wondering how we deal with God’s promises that often seem to go unanswered by God.

We are a fickle lot as humans, aren't we? We live in this constant tension between what God

promises us and Abram and Sarai in some future time on the one hand, and our real life lived out experiences on the ground, here and now with wars, poverty, hunger, injustice and injustice on the other hand. So, speaking for the rest of us regular people, Abraham asks God, “How Are we to know, God? If you are a God of the promise, give me some kind of sign or word that I can believe more fully, and trust in your promise.” And so Abraham, like us lives in this tension between trusting God in the covenant God has made with us, and blessings beyond measure both now, and at some future time, and our wanting to see signs of this covenant, in real time, here and now.

So here's the thing. This covenant made between God and Abram as they meet in this pathway, was and is a very solemn serious and profound covenant It's a covenant God makes with Abram and all humanity, and that we as human beings make with God. And yet time and time again, over the centuries, we know that we fail to uphold our end of this covenant. Our faith is fickle and wobbly, and we renege on our promises we make with God. And on the other hand God, meeting us in this Covenant space, remains faithful to us time and time and time again, even when we continually break our promises to God. God's promise to humanity is steadfast, and sure, and everlasting.

And now, with the coming of Jesus into the world, God enters into a brand new covenant (think New Testament) with humanity, meeting us on our journey, facing us, and now giving us his most treasured possession, his son Jesus the Christ, as a sign of his covenant with his people. And even still, while we fail to live up to our end of the agreement with God, God, remains faithful to us.

I'm reminded of the words of the Psalmist in this week's readings where he writes “*Hear my Voice, oh Lord, when I call; have mercy on me and answer me. Hide not your face from me; turn that away from your servant in anger. So my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me in. This I believe; that I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living wait for the Lord and be strong.*” Abram's faith, our faith, is formed in the living out of our lives, where changes and challenges to our daily living are reminders that we live in a dangerous and uncertain world. But it is God who reaches out to us. It is God, who remains faithful to us in his covenant with us even though, despite our best efforts, we fail to be faithful to God.

In Jesus Christ, God renews God's covenant with humanity and all of creation. And God knows that despite our best efforts and intentions, we are unable to fulfill our covenant with God. And yet through it all, God loves us all the more, and never tires of forgiving, never tires of renewing his covenant with us, never tires of loving us. Thanks be to God.

Amen.