

Abram's Faith: Covenant and Promise ¹

March 17, 2019

I

Let's begin at the beginning of our faith story. Let's begin with the story of Abraham. Actually, in today's Old Testament reading, he's just plain old Abram, 'cause God doesn't call him Abraham – the Father of a Multitude – 'til a couple of chapters further on in the Book of Genesis.

Now in this plot, Abram's had quite a journey up to now. See, when God had called him from the land of Ur, God had promised him land. But the problem is ... the problem is that land is passed on through heirs. So Abram and Sarai really need a child, but a child doesn't come. Year after year ... does not come.

And living and wandering as nomads, their saga is filled with hardship and adventure – to put it mildly ... but they still hold on to the promise of God.

So in today's scene, here's gray-haired Abram as an elderly Jew, still without an heir. And now God promises such an heir, along with land. But Abram would really like some proof. "O Lord God," he asks, "how am I to know that I'll reap this reward?" 'Cause here he is, an old man ... an elderly Jew without an heir. Oh he has a child, all right, one who's a slave. But a slave is not an heir. No, a slave can only extend the hopeless present, but an heir ... an heir is a sign of the future. And so Abram cries, "I continue childless ... with no true offspring."

See, Abram knows what's what! And I guess he's been living in a kind of restless torment all these years. And so he wants a sign – a sign that God's promise, this promise overcoming their barrenness – is true. 'Cause how can he continue to trust in the promise, when all the evidence against it, all this barrenness, surrounds him?

So God speaks the promise once more. But the story drawn here is very clear: Nothing is offered in this scene except God's Word. Oh God does step out into the night with Abram, showing him the stars in the black night sky. But this sign in the stars ... proves nothing. How could it?! How could this multitude of stars promise a son?

So you know, I think Abram is really struggling here with belief. Struggling with only faith to go on, faith based not on human reason, but on some core sense that ... well ... that God is God.

So thinking about all this, it does seem to me that in this scene here, for Abram – some kind of real certainty is given to him out of this darkness. 'Cause somehow he seems to know. Somehow ... he does seem to believe. And just maybe, way down at the heart of it, this knowing can only be the work of God's steadfast care.

And then this: God and Abram enter into a bizarre dance of a ritual, in the middle of the night, among a whole barnyard of slaughtered animals. And I think this is a scene you and I can probably hardly imagine. 'Cause here's Abram, wading ankle-deep in pools of blood, maybe waving his arms at the vultures who make off with an eye or a bit of hide before he can drive the big birds away.

And then night falls, and there he is, dozing, worn out from all his butchering. So he sleeps, fitfully, that awful kind of sleep where something infinitely dark and heavy seats itself on your chest and sucks the breath right out of you!

And now ... in the middle of such sleep, Abram sees a pot of fire, a flaming torch, pass between the halves of the carcass pieces. And as it turns out, this vision is the presence of the Lord – the Lord keeping His end of the bargain.

Oh it's a strange, bizarre scene to our eyes. But apparently, it was actually an accepted way to seal a covenant in Abram's day. Cutting animals in half and clearing a path between the pieces, each of the parties to the promise – to this covenant – walking between the severed pieces. Apparently as a sort of self-curse. Like saying, "May the same thing happen to me if I don't keep my word." Like "cross my heart and hope to die" ... if I don't keep my promise.

So that's how Abram's covenant with God is made, in a darkness so black you can't see your hand in front of your face ... in the deep darkness of night. But out of all this darkness ... I guess Abram does believe in the Lord's promise. 'Cause it says, "He believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned Abram ... as righteous."

So what's this all about? Well, I think this is basically a story of faith out of darkness; a clinging to belief in God's promises ... despite being sucked into a black hole where all that's familiar has changed ... sometimes beyond recognition. A clinging to belief in the end only because you know God ... is God.

II

OK. Well, Abram is chosen by God. He believed. He trusted. And God was good for His word. So how did this all go? What has now happened to this faith story, say around 2,000 or so years later ... what's happened after God reckoned Abram as righteous? Well, here is where we get to Luke's Gospel story. 'Cause it seems that God's chosen ... may be well on their way to being shut out of their heritage.

See, a little earlier in our Luke reading this morning, Jesus says that many will stand at the door and knock, but that door's just not gonna budge. Oh, they can knock 'til their knuckles are bloody, but it's not gonna do 'em much good. The Lord's gonna say on that day, "I don't know who you are, I don't know you."

Well, that's the worst of all judgments, isn't it? 'Cause as God's people, we had thought we were in like Flynn. We had thought we were on the inside, winning the game. But it turns out that – from Abram's day to Jesus' – prophets had come and gone. And still today – from time to time ... prophets have come and gone. Prophets had tried to tell us that we were on the wrong track ... missing the mark. Prophets had tried to tell us things we didn't want to hear. And so we turned our backs.

Jesus laments: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it. How often have I desired to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings. And you would not. So see, your house is left to you, desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again til you say ... until you say, 'Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

Well don't you still love me, Lord? Are you slamming the door in my face? So. Well. What's the verdict? Are you and I in or are we out? As someone put it, is that door still open a crack or has the banquet begun without us?

III

Well, thinking about both the Gospel and Abram scenes this morning, let's try to make sense of it all – and consider the real point here about faith and promise. See, according to legend, our Gospel scene takes place on the Mount of Olives. Jesus is standing, looking across the Kedron Valley, looking across to the great walled city of Jerusalem, pronouncing judgment on it. Maybe remembering how many prophets had been put to death there, and probably guessing ... that He's next. So Jesus either pronounces judgment or laments the loss of Jerusalem's love ... maybe both. In any case, legend has it that He wept.

And you know, thinking about it ... I bet that response is understandable to any of you who've had your love thrown back in your face. The hurt, the bewilderment, the bitter tears. The "OK, have it your way. I would have loved you ... no one would have loved you more than me ... I would have taken care of you. But I get the message. You don't want my love. Well to heck with it! You won't see me anymore. And you'll miss me when I'm gone."

And Jesus wept.

But then ... see, I don't think this is the final note. 'Cause can't you still hear a "whisper of Good News over the sound of His breaking heart?" Can't you? See, this is someone in love with you. This is someone devoted to you. This is someone bound in faith covenant with you and with me. And He says, "I tell you, you won't see me again until you say, 'Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

See, having said this, I think that even in the midst of Jesus' pain, He does leave that door cracked open, hoping for yours and my return ... letting you know that nothing, not even your refusal to follow Him, not even your failures, not even your flagging faith ... not even the Cross ... can separate you from the love of God in Christ.

See, this is an everlasting love. This is a covenant love, this is a promissory love that God sealed with Abram and keeps offering to you and me through Christ. And think about this: If you think of that original covenant made with Abram as something like a wedding promise, God didn't say, "Will you marry me?" No, God says, "I love you and you are mine. I have loved you with an everlasting love. And you are mine."

No, Abram's only choice – way back in the beginning – and our only choice, when you get right down to it – our only choice is whether to believe it or not, whether to act as if it's true or not. And for Abram, according to the record, he didn't even need time to think about it. He believed. He believed because I suppose the world made no sense if he didn't. He believed despite all the barren evidence to the contrary; he believed ... not based on human reason, but based on a primal sense that God is God.

And so Abram becomes the father of our faith, God's partner in a covenant that changed our world for all time.

Well, finally, here are you and me ... Abram's heirs. And so in a way I think you're also wed to God, a God you did not choose ... but a God who chose you first. Who says, "I love you and you are mine." A God who ... in Jesus ... became bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. "I love you. And you are mine."

So maybe it is love you're invited to feel this morning – invited to feel a love with real consequences all right ... real consequences that do require a faith response; real consequences that require discipleship on your part. But also a love that never ends.

So now what? Well, I guess basically this take-home point: Remember the covenant. And love the Lord by loving each other. A love who waits just behind that door where you and I so often have failed to show up, Love waiting for your first tap, your first change of heart. And then, He'll open that door wide to embrace you ... to embrace you and take you home.

Amen.

1. *Luke*, by Fred Craddock (Interpretation series); Synthesis for March 17, 2019, "Seeking the Father's Will"; Barbara Brown Taylor's "Wed by God," in *Mixed Blessings*.