

Discovering Promise

The Rev. Geoff Parker to Foreside Community Church - Falmouth, ME

Sunday, March 17, 2019

Scripture: [Genesis 15:1–12, 17–18](#)

Introduction to the Scripture

Today we're continuing in our series for Lent "Discovering the Inner Life." Last week, we went with Jesus into the wilderness to listen to those deep spiritual hungers that call us to be more truly ourselves. This week, we continue with the discovery of "promise," those things which anchor us and call us to hope... even when hope seems impossible.

You'll hear a story of Abram, who will eventually become "Abraham," who we and others will trace back in our faith heritage as one of our first ancestors. At the time we meet him, though, he has no descendants... He has been traveling for a long time with no place to call home... We'll hear God's promise, Abram's complaint, God's promise, Abram's belief, a really weird ritual, God's promise, God's promise... and God's promise.

Sermon

Promise is at one level a conversation about hope. The hope that the one who promises will make good. The hope that what has been will not always be forever.

Abram. Look, I'm just gonna call him Abraham a lot... it's the same guy, and you know that name better! Abraham is in the thick of it. In the wilderness, like we talked about last week with Jesus. Away from his family, his home... seeking a place of belonging, hungering for "home" whatever that might mean.

This scene of God's promises, and Abraham's acceptance of them, is no small stakes. This scene will be quoted all the way to the back of the bible. When the Apostle Paul is talking about faith, he will recall that "Abraham believed, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Let's just pause for a second, because this phrase gets used often in conversations about Christian faith where it seems like your job is to "believe, no matter what, no matter the evidence, no matter your doubts." It's great to get back to the source material here, because the "believing" that Abraham does looks like my style of believing, i.e. "Are you sure God, 'cause I'm sure not seeing what you're seeing... this doesn't seem like it's going to work out!" Abraham "believes" with doubt, and lament, and complaint... so if anybody ever tries to tell you that belief is quiet or doesn't ask questions... you have them take it up with Abraham.

If you ever had a drama class growing up, you may have played the foundational game of improvisation... I speak of course of the zen art of “Yes, and...” The basic theory of improvisation is that the only thing that shuts down a conversation, and hence a scene, is “no.” The challenge, then, is to respond to each of your scene partner’s suggestions with “yes, and...” accepting the premise as it develops

We all need a “yes, and” faith like Abraham here... discovering God’s promise as we walk tentatively with the Holy Spirit. Because no matter how you think God “works” in the world, I assure, it’s never been anything like what I expect... but I have found that the only reason to live like God’s promises are true, that God’s love is real and calling and healing, is because the alternative... is to not.

So about this ritual with the animals cut in two: yuck. The best that the folks who study this sort of thing can come up with is that covenants: promises in other words, were sometimes sealed with this ritual to underscore the consequences of the promise broken. You see, you walked between the broken bodies of the animals to show that death was on the line if you didn’t fulfill the promise. You would end up like the goat, or cow, or whatever if you didn’t come through on your end of the deal. God asks for a whole mess of livestock here to make sure Abram understands that God really means it.

What happens next is neat. See, if you pay attention, Abram falls asleep... I mean, really asleep. I mean the kind of sleep you sleep when you are just wrung out from anxiety or fear, sorrow or grief. While he sleeps then, God comes in fire and smoke... which if you cheat and read Exodus first means that you see how God will lead Israel into the promised land... and passes through the ritual to seal the promise.

See, this is God’s own “life” on the line... God’s own self linked with this promise, so that from here on out you can know this about God: Who is God? God is the God who saves and prospers. Who is God? God is the God who delivers. This is a theological assertion, so that Abram—and we—might know that when other things befall or challenge us... well, you can call that anything you want but God. Who is God? God is the God who promises. God is the God who fulfills the promise. So we seek to respond with our “yes, and...”

God’s promise to Abraham will come true, we assert, through the people that will trace their line and heritage to him, as numerous as the stars... including Isaac, who would be a source of Israel and Judaism’s history, and hence ours as Christians... and Ishmael, his half-brother, who Islam would come to trace back to as an ancestor of faith. Isaac and Ishmael would not have the easiest of sibling relationships. Neither will their descendants across all the millennia. The descendants of Isaac and Ishmael will argue for all those years over the blessing of Abraham and God’s promise to him. We will often be so focused on the argument with each other that we forget to argue with the patriarchal structure that silences Sarai and Hagar, their mothers, and reduces promise and blessing to a system of male hierarchy.

Even more, we can fail to do the imaginative and interpretive work of Abraham’s story to recognize that it is ultimately a story not just of promise to a particular people, but to all people. Our headlines to this day are filled with arguments over which specific land God might have promised to which particular

descendants of Abraham... but wrestle very little with the argument that God has also promised to call all the nations together in peace... and how we might occupy all the land of God's generosity and grace together. God's promise is still expanding out with a holy "yes, and..."

On Friday afternoon, 50 descendants of Abraham who went to worship at the Al Noor and Linwood mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand were killed by a man who could not imagine there is enough space in the sky for all the stars that God has promised. This attack falls into a pattern of all too frequent incidents motivated by the fear and futility of thinking that diversity is a threat to the security of their own white supremacist ideology. It is. The promise of God is not for a few, but for the vast constellation of humanity, and systems, structures, and sycophants of supremacy and privilege must be dismantled and discouraged so that we can more fully enjoy that promise as the abundance of God's work in our world.

Because God's promise for us continues to be born into the world, and asks us to participate and share in it with all. To make a space to dwell in safety for all, just as God does for Abraham. Here in our church community, here in our lives, here from generation to generation in this ministry of Christ which connects us to that starry sky thousands of years ago. We say that in Jesus we have found, "the light shines in the deepest night, and the night does not overcome it..." we say the promise of life and light to all nations all peoples cannot be contained.

On this journey of Lent, what promise of God are we seeking? Can we "believe" in it as Abraham did, questioning it, testing it, and finally embracing that it may be beyond your imagining? How do we each, as individuals, and as this community of God, say, quietly, even in the midst of sorrow and injustice or pain... hear God's promises, and say, "Yes, God, and?"

Amen.