

Sermon for Sunday, September 15, 2024

Genesis 15:1-6

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen

We continue our walk through the Old Testament as we hear a brief but significant story from Abraham's life. Allow me to clarify a couple of details before I get to the specifics of this passage.

1. You heard correctly that in this passage he is named Abram, not Abraham. God changes his name a little later in his story, but at this point in the narrative he is just Abram. The same is true for his wife. Sarai's name is later changed to Sarah. I will refer to both of them by their original names today. You may of course transpose these names in your head.
2. Terah, Abram/Abraham's father, and extended family left the city of Ur of the Chaldeans with the intent to move to Canaan: today's present day Israel. For reasons that are not recorded they halted when they reached the city of Haran. After a while Abram and his nephew Lot continued to move on to the land of Canaan. As the Bible tells it, Abram moved because God spoke to him and told him to go.
3. When God spoke to Abram God also promised that Abram's family would become "a great nation" and that Abram's name would be made great. This promise is important because it implies that Abram and Sarai would have children. At the time that God first spoke to Abram he was about 75 years old.

In today's reading ten years have passed since God spoke. Abram and Sarai have moved as instructed. Abram and Sarai are not getting any younger. In their world and culture family and heirs are important. Their legacy will be demonstrated through their heirs. From Abram and Sarai's human perspective time is running out for them to leave a legacy.

Then, once again God speaks:

- Do not be afraid.
- Your reward shall be very great.

But Abram challenges God and says, "I continue childless. My heir will be Eliezer of Damascus. You have not held up your end of the bargain God. And time is running out."

In response God reassures Abram and says that no one but your very own issue shall be your heir. You are going to have a child. I have promised this to you and I will fulfill this promise.

That's when God takes Abram outside to look at the stars and dares him to count them: an impossible task. That's when God reaffirms that Abram will have descendants as numerous as the stars. From that point on whenever Abram needed reassurance that God is truly going to fulfill this amazing promise, he could step outside, look up at the stars, and remember what God promised.

You may find yourself wondering why this passage is our text for today. The reason why lies in verse 6: "And [Abram] believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness." Abram believed God's words. Abram could look at the stars and trust. This is in spite of every bit of human knowledge that he possessed: knowing full well that when men and women get to a certain age they are no longer able to conceive and bear children. Abram trusted that God was capable of fulfilling the promise. Not only that God was capable, but that God WOULD fulfill the promise.

When we tell the stories from the Bible: one example being the eventual and miraculous birth of Abram and Sarai's son Isaac, but perhaps even more amazing is the resurrection of Jesus, it's easy to repeat them; to say, yes we believe that God is capable, but to shrug off (or deny) the possibility that God actually WILL act.

In the case of the resurrection: this is a promise that we believe; a promise that we have faith in. But Jesus' resurrection happened so long ago. We have only got the stories of those early witnesses to go on....stories that have been repeated for 2000 years. And all that we can do is have faith that it's true.

Sometimes I wonder to myself if I actually have that kind of faith: a faith as strong as Abram's. In my introductory words for worship today, I quoted a passage from Luke 17. "The apostles came up and said to [Jesus], "Give us more faith." But the Master said, "You don't need more faith. There is no 'more' or 'less' in faith. If you have a bare kernel of faith, say the size of a poppy seed, you could say to this sycamore tree, 'Go jump in the lake,' and it would do it." [The Msg]

So it's not so much that Abram has an enormous amount of faith. That's not what sets him apart. It's that his faith exists. The same is true for us. It's not so much that any of us have an enormous

amount of faith. It's that our faith exists. How does this happen? We believe that the gift of faith is given to us in our baptisms.

We just witnessed the presentation of Bibles to our third grade students. In their baptisms God acted and they were given the gift of faith. The same is true for each of us—the gift of faith was given to us in our baptisms. The gift of faith was not given to us through the action of our parents but rather through the action of our God working through the Holy Spirit. God provides that gift and it is exceedingly precious. But it also needs to be nurtured.

Parents, when your child was born you made a commitment to nurture them. That means physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. You made sure that they had food, clothing, and shelter. When they fell and skinned their knee you comforted them through their tears. You cheer them on when they have big accomplishments at school. But you also have a responsibility to nurture them spiritually. When your child was baptized you, parents, promised to do your best to nurture that gift of faith. That means that you teach them to pray. You open up the bible and read it to or with them. You bring them to worship. You help them to participate in the life of a faith-filled community. Why?

Because there will be times in their life when the rug is going to be pulled out from under them. When a crisis or a disaster occurs in their lives they are going to be at a loss without faith; without the promises of God intended for them. I cannot emphasize enough that your children need to know the promises of God. Your children need to know that God loves them and that Jesus is the embodiment of that love. That their sins are forgiven and that there is a place reserved for them in heaven. That they are members of God's family: forever.

The understandings of faith are passed down from generation to generation. We call Abram the patriarch; we call Sarai the matriarch: the father and mother of the Jewish and Christian faith. Their faith is the beginning. Eventually Abram and Sarai have a son Isaac and the faith is passed on to him. Isaac and his wife Rebekah have two sons: Esau and Jacob. The faith is passed on to them. Jacob eventually has 12 sons and the faith is passed on to them. From generation to generation. The stories of the faith have been passed on down through the ages to here and now; to us. Like Abram and Sarai, we have a responsibility to pass on the faith to the next generation.

Next week's Scripture reading is a portion of the Joseph story. Joseph is one of Jacob's sons...that means he is a great-grandson of Abram. Joseph's story is a long one and he has many difficult trials occur in his life. But through it all Joseph has faith in God even in the midst of incredible trials. His faith was nurtured early on so that he was ready when troubles came.

We gather here to nurture our faith so that when the troubles come we are ready, ready to respond **in** faith and **with** faith in God above. Amen.