



MINISTER
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*Second Sunday in Lent
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Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

Star Struck

Intro: The 15th chapter of Genesis is pivotal in the story of Abraham and Sarah. They have been promised by God that they would be the parents of a new and chosen nation. Today we hear the creation of a covenant, and assurances by God that the promise will come true. Sacred promises often were accompanied by ritual. Let us listen for God's word to us.

A story to help illustrate covenant. A little girl and her grandfather walk hand in hand by the shores of a great lake. They just walk, watching the waves, sharing joy at being outside together. As they go, the child notices something and picks it up, she puts it in the large hand that had been holding hers and says nothing but offers with it a smile. Then she runs off ahead. The old man opens his hand to find a smooth rock, with just a tear of knowing, the grandfather now understands that where ever their paths go from there, he will always be her grandpa. No matter what. A connection, a covenant that will not be broken between these two has just been recognized.

Our reading this morning contains one of a number of covenants in the Old Testament. It is the promise of children for Abraham and Sarah. It is the word from God that they will be the parents of a whole new nation, one that would be a light to all the world. The people chosen to be the people of God would start with them.

Covenants are hard to understand, they aren't contracts, or IOU'S. They don't always make sense in the usual way of viewing the world. They are binding promises that can be one sided, they often are, with God saying "I will do - this". And human participation is only to receive or reject what God sets forth.

Abraham and Sarah were called to receive what God promised. And to them it sounded too good to be true. They were called out of their barrenness, the reality of their world, by God's word. Their journey of faith began on no other basis than God's promise. A promise of children had been given to them years ago, and we read of it in chapter 12. At this point in the story were we are today, the emptiness continues for Sarah and Abraham, the promise had not yet come true. They were beginning to wonder, how could they, and why should they, continue to believe and hope? They were having a crisis of faith.

The opening verses of this chapter reveal the active back and forth, dynamic nature of the relationship between Abraham and God. Things are not at all static. God starts the conversation about this covenant with the words "Do not be afraid" This disorients Abraham for he was set on a future of fear. That's what he knew and expected - for the worst to happen. His deepest despair was that things would remain as they were. He had decided that there would be no change and the call to hope for children was a false alarm. Right away in the beginning, God makes a foundational promise. "I will be your shield, your reward will be great". Abraham doesn't say, "thanks, - sure thing - God". He says "show me". God accepts and understands his attitude. And God does

show Abraham. He takes him outside and shows him the star filled sky saying, "come, count the stars if you are able. You will have as many descendants as these."

Abraham accepts this, and he shows faith afterwards. Notice the scriptures doesn't say he believed in the Lord, but that he believed the Lord. Something happens when he understands the covenant God is making. When God shows him the stars and says see, he begins to see things in a different way. At first it doesn't make any real sense, what is the connection between the cosmos and children. God is the connection between Abraham's emptiness and the vastness of all the stars in the universe. The same God who makes stars beyond number, can also make a son for this childless family. We understand no more about how one happens than the other. Even so, it is true. God then binds them together in a covenant. One that says things will be different. One that offers hope for what is not yet.

The experience of going out under the stars was not an argument by God, but a revelation. It is a vision that changes everything for Abraham. It surprises his old reality that said things can not change. And shows him a new reality, one that is not based on human reasons, but on a principal awareness of God. His new faith is a miracle. The breakthrough

didn't come from Abraham thinking hard enough (which Presbyterians like to do) or getting in touch with his feelings (which Presbyterians have a harder time doing). It was God breaking through to him and saying "HELLO, I am here and I'm here for you."

Faith is believing in the divine presence and the divine promise. Believing the promise is what establishes an appropriate relationship, a righteousness between Abraham and God. Abraham trusted the promiser and believed the promise. This trusting, this belief is what sets us right with God.

In his Institutes of the Christian Religion, John Calvin discusses what he terms the properties of faith. True faith has four qualifications Calvin suggests: Faith risks, faith doubts, faith learns, and faith hopes.

Let's look at each of these briefly in turn. First, faith is incomplete in that everything is not revealed to us. Therefore faith involves risk, trust. Faith is living like God is God and God is good even when life experiences seem to suggest otherwise. Abraham had certainly experienced enough that would make it easy for him to say "there is no God." Perhaps we have as well. But he, and we, risk living as though it is true.

Second, faith will always be tinged with doubt. If there is no doubt, there is probably no faith. But faith triumphs over doubt because God illumines us enough to give assurance and God's grace allows us to doubt our doubts. Abraham and Sarah could say out loud and right to God. Show me the children. I don't see how you are going to do this. And they were still being faithful. Doubts are real, God's love and grace are more real.

Third, faith is progressive in that faith always mixed with unbelief and unbelief is always mixed with faith. To have faith is not to be perfect or settled, but to be constantly learning what you believe is true and have your own reasons for why you believe what you believe.

Finally, faith is triumphant because it is permeated with hope. Hope is the expectation of the things which faith believes to have been promised by God. Every prayer is an act of faith + hope.

God does not give Abraham any tangible assurance for his faith, but still Abraham moves from a position of protest to acceptance of the promise. It is his faith in action. It is by grace that we come to faith. And it is by faith that we find our true selves, and our salvation.

Lent is a time of the recognition of the barrenness in our lives. As we risk looking at our barrenness we face the harsh reality of the doubts and shortcomings we each have. God knows all this and still calls us to come, to show faith and to covenant. Lent is a crossroads, with a question. Will ours be a life of continuing barrenness, or will we like Abraham and Sarah, believe God and live daring lives. No easy answer can be given. because our answer will change us. Yet this is the essence of faith: God is calling us to be changed, to live out the promises of our baptisms. To live as people of faith.

Lent is a time to explore what it means to live by faith. To live by faith means that we are bound to God and God is bound to us. To live by faith means that we trust God above all else. That we trust that God has a drawn, a promise for each of our lives. To live by faith means that in the midst of this broken and alienated world, we live as the community of God's universal love. This lent let us go outside and crane our necks to count the stars. May we disregard our own voice of reason and listen to God's astounding voice of promise. Amen.