

## **Genesis 15:1-6 - God's Promise to Abraham**

There are two primary paths people take toward God. The first is that of conviction. They recognize that God is a holy God and they are a wicked person. They are convinced of their sin and their guilt and they come to God asking for nothing but forgiveness, a perfect reason to come to God.

The second path is that of desperation. These people approach God because they need something: finances, healing, deliverance, whatever. They have come to the end of their rope and are calling out for help to get out of the situation. They pray "Dear God, if you get me out of this, or get me through this, I'll go to church, or I'll pray more often", or whatever kind of deal they make with God. They're going to give God a shot and see if it works.

We see this frequently in the New Testament. People come to Jesus on the basis of their needs, asking Him to make their lives, or the life of a loved one, better and Jesus almost never rejects them. BUT, he also, almost always, brings out their spiritual need in the process, because as much as we do need healing and help in this life, what we need most of all is forgiveness for our sins so we can stand before a Holy God when we enter eternity. So, it's OK for people to come to God on the basis of their felt needs, but you can't stay there, because sooner or later, you are going to come to a crunch that God doesn't deliver you out of.

Instead, you will come to find there are times when God wants to walk with you through the crunching, the crushing and the grinding. When that time comes, if you are only doing the 'God thing' because of what you get out of it, you're going to try to bail and think somehow 'God let you down'. The reality is, sooner or later, we all have those moments ... times when God doesn't do what we thought God would do or what we hoped He would do. The question is how do we respond?

This morning we are going to see Abram, one of the greats of the Bible, the father of the Jewish nation and a hero of the faith, who faces a similar situation. How did he handle it, and what did he learn from it? To understand the divine promises to Abram in today's narrative, it is helpful to step back and look at what has been happening in Genesis up to this point.

In the first eleven chapters of Genesis, the "setting" for God's action is the whole world. All of creation (including, but not limited to, humanity) is declared good. But as the result of violence, mainly human violence, but also, the violence of the wider creation, God generates a flood to wipe away all the wickedness and violence. This, in effect, functions as a kind of divine "do-over". Of course not all is wiped out; Noah, his family, and the animals connect the past to the future. Then, the story moves decisively away from the cinemascope perspective of the whole world, and zooms in on one man and his family.

Instead of pondering the wickedness and violence of human beings, that, as God realizes, is not going away, and instead of trying to work blessing for the world through humanity in general, God takes a new approach: working through some particular individuals to bless all the families of the earth; to work universal benefit through a particular individual; one that God repeats in the incarnation of Jesus.

God makes three sweeping promises to Abram, who is later renamed Abraham: land, descendants and a great nation, and that through him all the families of the earth will be blessed. But with so much at stake for God (the blessing of the whole world rides on this one fellow and his family), Abram's next actions must have been dismaying: a famine having driven the family to Egypt, he shoves Sarai, his wife, into the arms of Pharaoh in order to protect his own skin: "Say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you..."

Then God elaborates on the promises of land and descendants, asserting that Abram's children will be like the dust of the earth: so that if one can count the dust of the earth, his offspring also can be counted. This implies, that they will be innumerable – a great nation. If God has concerns about Abram due to the unsavoury my-wife-is-my-sister manoeuvre, then Abram must have some serious concerns about God, as well, since everyone knows that they have no children and there is no prospect of any children; Sarai is barren. Abram's response to God's promises is not recorded; no assent or disbelief, or anything else, leading one to wonder how Abram processed these seemingly ridiculous promises.

In the previous chapter, Abram has attacked a force of five allied kings with a combined army of 50-100,000 on their way home from ransacking all sorts of villages and putting down a rebellion when they captured Lot, Abram's nephew, who was living in Sodom. When Abram got word of it, he gathered his men together and pursued them 125 miles. He met up with the army and engaged in a running battle for the next 45 miles before he finally recovered the people that had been taken prisoner and the goods that had been plundered. At the end of the chapter, Abram refuses the spoils from the king of Sodom because he does not want the king to say, "I have made Abram rich". Abram does not want to profit, or give the appearance of profiting, from the whole ugly episode.

This is the backdrop for the divine promise in today's story: Abram does not need wealth from the king of Sodom or anyone else because God will reward him. God shows up and says, don't worry about the reward you just turned down, I am your reward. Your 'exceedingly great reward'. God basically tells Abram, "I am a greater reward than you can even imagine, and I am yours." And so far, everything sounds great. There's Abram worrying and God shows up to save the day. But Abram takes this as an occasion to burst out, finally, with the question that must have been weighing for some time: what about those kids you promised me? "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir."

This is a perfectly reasonable response to what appears to be a broken promise. After all, Abram has left home, family, and land in response to God's outrageous call and promise. He has come to a new, unfamiliar land and now, it appears, his lineage will die there with him. God's promises have not held true. He hears these great spiritual promises and says, in effect, 'that's cool God, but what about this?'

Now infertility is a heavy burden for anyone who experiences it. In the ancient world, infertility was made worse by the fact that children were one's insurance policy for being cared for in old age. "Honour your father and mother" was aimed not at confirmation students but at adult children of elderly parents who depended on them for life itself. Having no children meant a bleak future.

Children in the ancient world were also the means by which one's name lived on. In a world where the idea of resurrection had not yet developed, the only kind of

life after death that was possible was that one's name lived on in one's children and their descendants. For Abram and Sarai, then, who had left behind everything familiar in order to step into God's promised future, the continued barrenness of their situation mocked their hope.

God has promised, but God's promises look empty in the face of barrenness and hopelessness. "Fear not," God says, but Abram responds, "You have given me no son. You have not kept your promises." But hopelessness is not where the story ends.

Now notice the tone of God's response. He doesn't tear into Abram with, 'You little ingrate; I offer you Myself and all you care about is a son? Do you know who I am?' No, God doesn't respond that way, even though He could. This is now the fourth time He has spoken to Abram, and each time the promise of descendants was involved: The original call in Ur: "I will make you a great nation"; Passing through Canaan: "To your descendants I will give this land." After returning from Egypt: "I give [this land] to you and your descendants forever. And I am going to give you so many descendants that like dust, they cannot be counted." So, although God could be short and sarcastic here, He's not. Instead, out of grace, He clarifies, "Abram, you will have a descendant, in fact you will have more descendants than you can number, they will come from you, not someone in your house."

God speaks God's promise again, that Abram will have a son. And then, to illustrate that promise, God brings Abram outside into the night. "He brought him outside and said, 'Look towards heaven and count the stars, if your are able to count them ... So shall your descendants be.' And Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord counted him as righteous because of his faith." Outside, under the glory of the endless night sky, Abram is able to believe what seemed impossible in the close confines of his tent.

God is using Creation to remind Abram of Who he is dealing with. Abram knew God as the God of Creation, the One who was responsible for everything he saw when he looked up. So Abram looked and saw an incredible expanse of things he didn't fully understand, but he knew it was huge and God had done it all. He was

reminded of who this God was and what He was capable of. It was like hitting Abram's reset button; looking up at the night sky did that for Abram. When he remembered Who he was dealing with, he remembered what was possible.

The God who created the heavens and scattered the stars in radiance across the sky is the same God who promises him that he will have a son and, descendants to rival the number of the stars. Under the glory of those countless stars, Abram believes God. He considers God trustworthy. He holds onto the promise despite all evidence to the contrary. And it is that faith that God counts as righteousness.

God has made grand promises, but we have not known until now what Abram thinks of those promises or of the promise-giver. Similarly, God has had some reason to wonder whether choosing Abram was a good idea, whether he is really able to be the bearer of the promise to the nations. So this is a significant moment in the narrative when we are told that God and Abram are developing a level of trust, and that each is encouraged by the promises or actions of the other.

An important thing we need to learn is, that we need to **look at our problems through God, and not look at God through our problems**. When Abram reflected on Who it was that was talking to him, and what He has already done, specifically in the work of Creation, he was able to have faith once again. Abram's belief was accepted by God and called righteous. And, all of a sudden, Abram is fired up again, he believes in God and becomes the father of the faith. BUT HE STILL DOESN'T HAVE THE KID!!! Have things really changed for Abram? They haven't, at least not materially.

Outwardly, there is no improvement in his status or condition. God is capable of miracles. He spoke the entire Creation into existence. He took a handful of dirt and breathed life into it and 'presto' there you had Adam, the first man. He took one of Adam's ribs and 'presto' the first woman. Now, if Abram wanted a son so badly, and God is capable of all of this, WHY DIDN'T GOD JUST CREATE A SON FOR HIM RIGHT THEN AND THERE!?! - perhaps out of dust?

It's the same reason why sometimes God doesn't answer your situation in the way you want. It's because ultimately life isn't about what **we** have on this earth, it's

about where we go from here. The most important thing in all of our eternal existence is our relationship with God and that is what God is the most interested in developing. That's why He started out telling Abram "I am your shield" and "I am your exceedingly great reward." It's not that He doesn't want Abram to have a son, He does, but first and foremost, He wants Abram to be satisfied with his relationship with God.

So, are you satisfied with your relationship with God? He makes the same offer to us through the gift of His son Jesus who came and suffered on the cross to absorb, like a shield, the penalty for all of our sins. He offers to be your exceedingly great reward, a reward that you have not earned, but only receive, because God is forgiving, merciful and gracious.

The story continues next week with the story of Joseph and his brothers, Abram's great-grandchildren. In them, the promise of countless descendants begins to be fulfilled. But the foundation is laid here, in God's promise and in Abram's trust in that promise. In a rarely cited and read story later in Genesis, Sarai has died and been buried. Abraham in his very old age marries another woman - Keturah - and has 6 more sons! The promise looked bleak when it was made. After all, it took 13 years after God took Abram outside to look at the numberless stars in the sky for Isaac to be born. But, God kept his promise as he always has and does.

Is there a lack of a sense of promise in our congregations? Many are elderly, numbers are rapidly declining in worship as we age or die. There have been no children for a number of years. At times it is a real struggle to remain positive and hopeful about a future for our congregation.

Like a childless Abram and Sarai we have no one to bequeath our faith. Abram is righteous and, yet, in the sense of believing God will provide us with heirs, are we "righteous"? Can we see the promise for our small congregation? It is God who will provide the heirs in our old age even if it seems unbelievable as it did for Sarai and Abram. Perhaps it is time to let go longing for the future (What will we do/be/say next?) and lean into the past. We are all descendants of Abram and Sarai. What stars has this church given birth to by the grace of God through its history? How has God's promise already been fulfilled? Abram and Sarai, after all, die. The

promise is not for them, nor for us, nor for a congregation to be eternally reborn. So let's celebrate what we've had and what we have - 100 plus years of faithful service, while we live and not wait for the possible eulogy.

The blessing of Abraham lives in and extends to those who are in Jesus Christ. Paul wrote: "In the same way, Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith. The real children of Abraham, then, are those who put their faith in God. What's more, the Scriptures looked forward to this time when God would make the Gentiles right in his sight because of their faith. God proclaimed this good news to Abraham long ago when he said, 'All nations will be blessed through you.' So all who put their faith in Christ share the same blessing Abraham received because of his faith." So then, those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

The greatest promise is the promise of peace with God. This is why in Galatians, Paul writes:

*"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."*

Julian of Norwich wrote this in the 15<sup>th</sup> century:

*"God, of your goodness give me yourself; For you are sufficient for me. I cannot properly ask anything less, to be worthy of you. If I were to ask less, I should always be in want. In you and you alone do I have all."*

**Amen.**

## **PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE -- SEPTEMBER 15, 2024**

### **PRAYERS FOR THE WORLD**

Let us pray for the poor, hungry, and neglected all over the world, that their cries for daily bread may inspire works of compassion and mercy among those to whom much has been given.

As schools and universities begin their new school year, let us pray for schools and centres of learning throughout the world, for those who lack access to basic education, and for the light of knowledge to blossom and shine in the lives of all God's people.

Let us pray for an end to the divisions and inequalities that scar God's creation, particularly the barriers to freedom faced by God's children throughout the world because of gender, race, sexual orientation or faith tradition; that all who have been formed in God's image might have equality in pursuit of the blessings of creation.

Let us pray for the health of women, children, and families around the world, especially for an end to maternal and child mortality, that in building healthy families, all God's people may be empowered to strengthen their communities and repair the breaches which divide nations and peoples.

Let us pray for an end to pandemic disease throughout the world, particularly the scourges of HIV/AIDS, malaria, monkey pox and tuberculosis; that plagues of death may no longer fuel poverty, destabilize nations, and inhibit reconciliation and restoration throughout the world. We are thankful for Canada's offer to send mpox vaccine to countries that need it.

Let us pray for an end to the waste and desecration of God's creation, for access to the fruits of creation to be shared equally among all people, and for communities and nations to find sustenance in the fruits of the earth and the water God has given us.

Let us pray for all nations and people who already enjoy the abundance of creation and the blessings of prosperity, that their hearts may be lifted up to the needs of the poor and afflicted, and partnerships between rich and poor for the reconciliation of the world may flourish and grow.

We pray for those who for years have carried feelings of guilt or regret for something they did or something they neglected to do; who find it difficult to ask for forgiveness or to forgive themselves.

Give your grace to all peacemakers; those who endeavour to resolve with justice all conflicts between nations, and within communities, commerce and industry, parliaments, families, marriage partners, in committed relationships, neighbours, colleagues, and friends.

We pray for those who are facing illness, medical treatments and therapies, life altering diagnosis, and prolonged healing, who at times may feel overwhelmed, discouraged, lost for answers, and who look to you for hope, comfort, and peace. Today we pray for Bishop Kathy and Kristin Steele.

We pray for all victims of war and violence; Russia and Ukraine, Israel and Gaza, Sudan and all nations facing conflicts throughout the world as they fight for freedom and justice. We pray for areas where climate change has led to drought, flash flooding, and conflict over water rights and resources. May we respond to those living in poverty, as peacemakers, who challenge the violence that threatens us all.

We pray for: the congregation of St. Paul's Lutheran in Prince Rupert as they navigate through the upcoming change brought about through Rev. Diana Edis' having accepted a call to return to the US in November; Our Saviour Lutheran in Richmond - Rev. Christoph Reiners; Fairfield United Church as they discern their future as a congregation. We pray for Bishop Kathy, Bishop Susan, Bishop Anna, Anglican Primate Linda Nicolls, all pastors, priests, deacons, lay leaders, musicians, and volunteers as they lead their congregations in these challenging times of climate change and natural disasters around the world; for the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land, the congregation of San Juan Camino d'Esperanza and Pastor Ana Maria Jara.

We pray that God sustain those who respond to wildfires, floods and natural disasters. Keep them safe from harm and surround them with God's care as they keep the lives and homes of all they protect safe from harm. We pray for all the evacuees, those who have lost their homes, and those waiting to return. Give them strength and hope as they face the prospect of rebuilding their lives and communities.

Lord God, Loving Saviour, Empowering Spirit, we offer you these prayers and ask that you make us righteous by placing our faith in You. Captivate us, call us and fill us, that we may be messengers of your lavish love, hope, compassion and mercy to this world that you love so dearly. **Amen**

# Lord's Prayer

Our Father ...