

Second Sunday in Lent
Genesis 15:1-12,17-18
March 17th, 2019
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The word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” But Abram said, “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” And Abram said, “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” But the word of the Lord came to him, “This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.” He brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Then he said to him, “I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.” But he said, “O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?” He said to him, “Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.”

I don't know, maybe it's just me. Seems like the people in our readings this morning are a little crunchy. Well, that's alright. I imagine some of us are feeling a bit peppery these days too.

From Luke, we heard a snippy Jesus who is dismayed about Jerusalem calling Herod names. We heard part of Paul's letter to the church in Philippi that he wrote with tears in his eyes about some of the slackers in the community that he is sure are on the road to ruin.

And then there's Abram.

Abram is especially cranky and with good reason. His story is pregnant with potential, which is ironic because YHWH is once again promising Abram and Sarai countless descendants. All around them, creation is teeming with life, including generations of the people that God commanded to “be fruitful and multiply.”

Even so, Abram and Sarai are the first couple to be “childless.”

And not for lack of faith. When YHWH told them to leave their homes, Abram and Sarai, their nephew Lot and people attached to them went to the new land that YHWH showed them looking forward to becoming a great people. Abram was already 75 and he and Sarai still had no children, despite

YHWH's promises. Years passed. A famine drove Abram, Sarai and Lot to Egypt and after a time they were forced back to Canaan. Still no child.

Abram and Sarai did prosper materially – got fairly rich, come to that – without children. They became so wealthy that they could no longer pasture their herds with the rest of the family. Their nephew Lot moved to a pretty plot of land in the Jordan Valley.

Unfortunately, Lot was seduced by the beauty of the land and missed the character of the people in the surrounding towns. He was taken prisoner in a war involving Sodom, Gomorrah and other neighboring towns. Abram and an army had to rescue Lot and bring him home.

“After these things...” Those are first words of Genesis 15 that are left out of our lectionary. They refer to all that has led up to this point, “After these things, the word of YHWH came to Abram in a vision, ‘Fear not’.”

Now, throughout the prophetic books and into the New Testament, when YHWH begins a message with “Fear not,” it means you are about to hear good news. In this case, YHWH tells Abram: “I am your shield, your exceeding great reward.”

Abram's patience breaks.

To understand why, we need the additional background of events leading up to this breaking point. From behind Abram's eyes, the future looks bleak. An aging Bedouin, he has diminishing expectations of owning great lands. In fact, by the time Abram dies, the only bit of ground he will ever own is the cave where he and Sarai are buried.

Hopes for offspring must also feel increasingly unlikely. The first Jew fears that he will be the last.

And so, in this, the first actual dialogue between Abram and YHWH, instead of praising YHWH for this new promise, Abram expresses his frustration. And rather pointedly: “O Lord YHWH, what can you give me when I am going to my end childless, and the steward of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” YHWH remains silent, forcing Abram to explain his skepticism.

“Look, to me you have given no seed, and here a one born in my house will inherit everything I have.” Seeing only the span of his own lifetime, Abram expresses understandable human disappointment. The human strategies that he can imagine appear less and less capable of reaching the desired results.

The unlimited YHWH, however, is unbound by time and sees all time at once – all lifetimes simultaneously. And so our ancient Jewish forebears gave us this story that shows YHWH working out something divine in the face of human inadequacy.

YHWH reassures Abram that Eliezer will not be the one to inherit, but that Abram will have an heir that, in the Hebrew, “goes out of his own body.” Then YHWH takes Abram outside and says, “Look up to the heavens and count the stars, if you can count them...So shall be your seed.”

Now, there was an 11th c. French Rabbi named Solomon ben Isaac or, as he is more frequently known, Rashi. He is still one of the most influential Jewish commentators in history. In his commentary on the Book of Genesis, Rashi passed on a story from the ancient sages about the conversation between YHWH and Abram.

According to the sages, Abram said, “I see in my stars that I am not destined to have children.” And YHWH replied, “*Stand outside* your astronomical calculations.” Leave them behind, in other words. Change your limited way of thinking. Where YHWH is involved, the stars have no noticeable influence on the destiny of YHWH’s people. And there’s a difference between having biological children and being generative.

To see it requires a change of perspective. And trust.

In time, of course, YHWH will change Abram’s name, which means “mighty father,” to Abraham, which means “father of many nations.” Abram will think this is a great idea, although he never asks Sarai what she thinks about becoming the mother of many nations.

Sarai will suggest that they have a child through her Egyptian servant, Hagar. The 86-year-old Abram will also think this is a great idea and Hagar will soon conceive and give birth to Ishmael, whose descendants include many Arab Muslims. Years later, when Abram is 100 and renamed Abraham, and Sarai is 90 and renamed Sarah, they will finally have a son, Isaac, who will be Jacob’s father and the grandfather of the 12 tribes of Israel.

All that happens later.

This morning, Abram is filled with tensions and doubt. This morning, there is little peace of mind. Abram has been expecting a huge family of biological children and thousands of acres. He worries about his lack of heirs, about the state of his covenant with God, and his relations with his neighbors.

What Abram does in the midst of all this struggle is to talk with YHWH. And YHWH responds by cutting a covenant with Abram.

The result is a faith experience that radically differs from what many of us have come to expect. Abram and Sarai’s faith is not passive submission to a check-list of ideas. Theirs is not a faith that stifles doubt and disappointment.

The faith of Abram and Sarai, of Moses and the prophets; the faith of Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth and Zechariah; of Paul and the apostles; the faith

that Jesus Christ embodied and teaches is a willingness to trust God, despite our doubts and distress.

Faith is trust, especially in the reality of setbacks and suffering. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once wrote: “Our capacity to deal creatively with shattered dreams is ultimately determined by our faith in God.”

God does deliver on promises, though not always what or how we expect, and rarely when. After hundreds of years, Abraham and Sarah’s offspring and spiritual children now include millions of people – Jews, Christians and Muslims. Many of those children still struggle to see God’s justice in their own lifetimes.

What will allow God to bring all those hopes to fruition in God’s own time is faithfulness to God. And so we practice waiting without despair, waiting with hope and perseverance. Waiting in conversation with God, especially when we are feeling frustrated, impatient or disappointed.

“Faith,” Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote, “is the ability to live with delay without losing trust in the promise; to experience disappointment without losing hope, to know that the road between the real and the ideal is long and yet be willing to undertake the journey.”

That is the faith that Abraham and Sarah themselves lived into, though it was riddled with obstructions and delays; the faith that *all* their children inherit – Jewish, Christian and Muslim. That is the faith that we keep alive and pass on by gathering together as a community like a brood under the wings of a loving mother hen. That trusting faith allows us to lean on people who can carry our faith for us when we need them, knowing that someday they may be as unsure and unsteady as we are today and that we will one day be strong.

What binds us is our loving, generative willingness to *just keep going*; to keep turning and returning to God day after day. That is the faith that will keep us standing firm until the time comes when we say, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”

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