

9th Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)

Before we read today's passage, some background is important. As we approach the halfway point in our nine week sermon series journeying through the book of Genesis, we see today a fundamental shift in the wider narrative. So far in Genesis, God has dealt with particular people who have come and gone rather quickly as we progress through the narrative. Adam and Eve have their "scene" and then depart after a chapter or two. Likewise, Cain and Abel and Noah all had their parts to play and then left after their relatively short stories.

Today, though, we see the beginning of a different kind of narrative. With God's relationship with Abraham and Sarah, we see a departure from mere folkloric short stories to a more developed narrative in which God chooses a particular people to be God's vehicle for righteousness and mercy in the world.

Abraham first enters the scene in chapter twelve. He was living what we can expect was a relatively simple life in the land of the Sumerians. But then God appears to him and gives him the following instruction "Go." No more, no less. That's all Abraham is called to do on his part. On God's part, however, God promises to make of him a great nation, to bless him, and to bless all the families of the earth through him. Furthermore, God promises Abraham lots of land and many children to inhabit it.

Abraham and his wife, Sarah, obey the Lord's invitation and they go.

Almost immediately they run into trouble. As they travel, they run into Pharaoh (who happens to think that Sarah is quite a looker) and Abraham passes Sarah off as his sister in order to save his skin. God is not happy with this. Pharaoh and his house get afflicted with plagues and pharaoh sends Abraham and Sarah on their way. Meanwhile there is also some drama between Abraham and his nephew Lot. A few chapters pass and then we find ourselves at today's passage in chapter 15.

Walter Brueggemann describes the context of today's passage in the following way: God has called Abraham and Sarah out of barrenness. God has promised children and they still have none. They are waiting. God's promise that is given in chapter 12 has yet to be fulfilled. So, the question is this: which will have the final word, Sarah's empty womb or God's promise of offspring? It is in that tension where we find ourselves in today's passage...

Genesis 15:1-21

After these things 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 towards 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 turtle-dove, 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. Then the Lord said to Abram, 'Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years; but I will bring judgement on the nation that they serve, and afterwards they shall come out with great possessions. As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.'

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, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.'

One of my favorite current albums is Sara Bareilles' newest one called *The Blessed Unrest*. It's a great collection of songs with some of my favorites being "I Choose You," "Chasing the Sun," and "Manhattan." But if there's one song on this album you've heard it's likely her belting song, "Brave," which has received significant radio play. She wrote this song to a friend to encourage them to be brave and sure of themselves in a world that is often unforgiving. As I was listening to this song this week in the car, belting it out loud with my windows rolled down in Amagansett, I couldn't help but be reminded of Abraham and the bravery he must have had to obey God's command and drop everything and just...go!

You see, historically speaking, we have every reason to suspect that Abraham had a pretty sweet gig where he was before God uprooted him. He lived in the land of the Sumerians who were known for their technological advances such as irrigation and, also, for creating the first ever alphabet. Abraham could have lived a very quiet life.

But then God comes to him and says, "go." God just says "you go and I'll do the rest. I'll give you land. I'll bless you and make your family a blessing to all the earth. And most importantly, I'm gonna give you and your wife, Sarah, children. That's what I'm gonna do. In the meantime, your job is to just go!"

If I were Abraham I probably would have responded with something like this: "You want me to just go? You're not gonna give this 75 year old anything else to do? Just go? You know, you told Adam and Eve to go and be fruitful and multiply and take care of the earth. You told my ancestor Noah to go and build an ark - but you're just telling me to go and nothing else?! Well, ok then. I guess I'll go..."

Now, the faith of Abraham is spoken of frequently through the biblical narrative, especially in the letters of Paul in the New Testament.

From these texts in Genesis we can make a few assertions about Abraham's faith.

First of all, Abraham's faith was not found in his previous actions of merit because the text doesn't tell us of anything that Abraham did prior to his encounter with God. Therefore, faith is not being a "good guy or gal."

Secondly, Abraham's faith was not found because of his obedience to God's commandments because the 10 Commandments have yet to appear and the laws and statues of Leviticus and Deuteronomy are still quite a ways down the road. Therefore, faith, in the context of this passage, is not necessarily following God's commandments.

Therefore, we can safely assume that the source of Abraham's faith was not because of his obedience or outstanding character. Rather, Abraham's faith was evidenced by his trust in God's providence. God said "go," and Abraham went. That's trust. Now his trust faltered from time to time with some significant consequences. Both he and Sarah have moments where they are impatient and do not trust the promise of fruitfulness. But, thankfully, faith is NOT the absence of doubt. We are reminded of this truth in today's passage.

We come to chapter 15 after some significant time has passed since God's original promise to Abraham some three chapters prior.

God opens up the dialogue with a phrase heard often in the biblical narrative, "Do not be afraid." God seems to read Abraham's mind and know what anxiety is already in his heart. Abraham points the accusatory finger at God. "*You have given me no offspring!*" God's only reply is one requesting persistent trust in the face of that which shows otherwise. God takes Abraham for a stroll and, placing his arm around Abraham's shoulder says, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, (if you can!). You're descendants will outnumber the billions of heavenly bodies you see before you."

As a friend of mine mentioned in our bible study last week, Abraham was probably thinking "Billions? Why don't we start with *one*!?"

Abraham was impatient. So was Sarah. So would we be. Lord knows neither of them were getting any younger! I do not pretend to know for a minute the angst of waiting for a child. I know many couples who have struggled to have children and it appears as though it can be an unforgiving, lengthy, and torturous wait. There are likely people in this very room who can relate to Abraham and Sarah's desire for a child with much more authenticity than me.

But their waiting for God's promise to be fulfilled points to a larger reality and that reality is this: you and I, like Abraham and Sarah, are called to be in a state of a "blessed unrest" (to borrow the phrase from Ms. Sara Bareilles). Abraham and Sarah are called to wait longer than they would have liked to see the fulfillment of a promise when all evidence suggests that it is the most foolish thing in the world to wait for. They hang in there, not without their stumbles and doubts, and are blessed by God's providence in the meantime.

Now, you and I know that God's promise was fulfilled. We know that Abraham and Sarah do in fact have a child with each other and that child's name was Isaac (which, by the way, in Hebrew means "laughter"). But, Isaac does not show up in chapter 12 when God first promises him. Isaac does not show up in today's passage, either. In fact, Isaac doesn't even show up in next week's passage for that matter. Isaac is not born until chapter 21 until Abraham is 100 years old. If we do the math, this means that Abraham and Sarah waited 25 years to see the fulfillment of the promise God made to them. 25 years is a long time for anyone, especially someone like me who has only been on this earth not much longer than that! 25 years Abraham and Sarah were in a state of blessed unrest.

The term "blessed unrest," I believe, is an appropriate one for today's passage because it holds two words in tension with each other. The "unrest" part speaks to the truth of that which we wait for, that which we long to see fulfilled, those wrongs that need to be righted, those images on the television screen that pull our hearts in two and make us question "the point of it all."

The "blessed" part speaks to the truth of the God who sits with us while we wait. We are blessed not because everything God promises happens when we want it, but because God promises anything in the first place. God does not demand of us full and complete confidence 100% of the time. Rather, God

invites us to trust in God's ability and desire for creation and righteousness. And that trust would be easy if this blessed unrest were only five minutes. But, often, it's not. We wait and we trust. It's a tough thing to do; and that's why I'm so very glad that you and I are doing it together. Who knows? Perhaps as you and I continue this "blessed unrest" we might find some other people who need some help trusting in God's promises, too?

In a manner similar to last week's service with Noah and the rainbow, we are going to respond to the word of God by lifting up our prayers to God in a visual manner. On the back of your bulletin, you will find a microscopic percentage of the stars that God showed to Abraham on that dark night. I would invite all of us, as we sit for a moment in this blessed unrest, to pick up a crayon or pencil and to write within or around the stars some blessings that you are waiting for, either for yourself, your family, or for others on your heart this day.

Let us pray...