

J.j.

The God of Abraham

St. Paul's Lutheran Church, 57th & Broadway, Sacramento, CA

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Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 ¹When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. ²And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." ³Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, ⁴"As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁵No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁶I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. ... ¹⁵God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her." (NRSV)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father; to Whom be the glory now and forever. Amen.
(Gal. 1:4 NIV)

"To deliver us from this present evil age."

This was true when Paul wrote that to the Galatians, and it's still true today.

Evil is bad news, and the world news today is mostly bad news--ISIS, jobs, IRS lies.

So much for world news. - - - And now for your extended weather forecast. . . .

My goodness, have you seen the snow-scenes? Have you seen the cars in the ditches?

Of course, we here in California want them to ship that snow and water west!

Does any of that have a connection with the God of Abraham?

That's what my sermon is about today: **The God of Abraham.**

And here's the first question I'd like to ask:

I. In This Present Evil Age Is Abraham's God to be Trusted?

Point 1, God Makes Promises.

¹When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. ²And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous."

Covenant-making is characteristic of the God of Abraham.

One of my seminary classmates, Dr. Roy Schroeder, writes:

"It is an expression of his grace and mercy. His covenants are always one-sided promises; he blesses those whom he chooses." [*Preaching the Passion*, p. 151]

But God had already made this promise to Abram when God called him--Abram was his name then--to leave Haran and go south thru Syria to what is now Israel.

[Quick aside: yes, Syria is in the news again--they're fighting ISIS with no help from US.]

God didn't call it a covenant then--He just said that He would bless Abram and make him a blessing to all the families of the earth.

As the saga of Abram/Abraham moves along, taking up 13½ chapters of Genesis, 1st book in the Bible, here in ch. 17, God does something more--He reveals to Abram His name, El Shaddai, meaning "God Almighty," and tells Abraham the content of the covenant which is, I am your God, and I will make you exceedingly numerous.

Point 2, Did Abraham Really Trust El Shaddai's, God Almighty's, Promise?

Well, Abram had heard this before, and now he's 99 yrs. old and Sarai is 90 and they have not one child of their own.

No wonder the holy writer tells us right after our text that Abraham fell on his face laughing when told to expect a child about this time next year. (ch. 17:17)

Was that a laugh of distrust? I think so.

You see, he and Sarah had decided that Abraham should have a child by Sarah's Egyptian slave, Hagar, and Ishmael was already 13 yrs. old when God promised they would have Isaac.

Could it be Abraham was thinking, "We've already got this thing handled, El Shaddai? He and Sarah did not believe God was able to give them a son after Sarah's menopause.

This El Shaddai, this God of unlimited power, could not deliver they thought.

How hard it is for you and I to trust God when promises are delayed and delayed. We pray dutifully but God, e.g., doesn't send enough rain to break the drought. What have you hoped and prayed for, but you have not received your desires?

Point 3, Could Abraham Be Cut From the Team?

In our text God gave Abram and Sarai new names--from Ab-ram "Exalted Father" to Ab-raham "Father of a multitude," and from Sarai to Sarah, (both her names mean Princess)--which means that by naming them God was claiming them for his own. He did not ask Abraham to agree to the covenant--El Shaddai just confiscated him for a special purpose, even though Abraham fell down laughing. And Sarah laughed, too, when she heard through the tent flap that preposterous promise of a son in her old age--I'd say they were skating on thin ice.

God nevertheless did give them a sign of the covenant--circumcision.

And Abraham was obedient--he himself was circumcised in his old age as well as every male of his household, even Ishmael--because God warned (in those verses left out of our lesson today) that "any uncircumcised male ... shall be 'cut off' from my people; he has broken my covenant."

Abraham's flesh was circumcised but his heart was not--his heart was hung up on his own plan to become a father of nations.

By making his own plans he risked being cut from the team, a final and eternal cut.

However, Good News!

The Mighty God, El Shaddai, Took Matters into His Own Hands.

Fourth Point, God Tested Abraham for a Reason.

Fast forward--this is how Gen. 22 begins. "After these things God tested Abraham....

He said take your son, your only son whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering."

Sarah did have her son--they named him 'Isaac' as El Shaddai Had ordered them.

Do you remember what Isaac means? "Laughter!"

I'm guessing that God wanted them to remember, every time they called out Isaac's name, the unbelieving laughter both had expressed at God's ridiculous promise.

And Abraham made a great feast on the day that his son was weaned.

But a great test lay ahead--El Shaddai said, "Now kill him."

Is there any story in the OT more strange or mysterious than this?

What kind of a God would demand human sacrifice, especially regarding this wonder child, this child of promise?

Over the centuries, many students of Holy Writ have engaged this story.

Dr. Richard Johnson writes of one of the most powerful reflections on the text written some years ago by Wm. Willimon [Christian Century, 3.16.83, pp 237-238].

He told of a Bible study class in a suburban congregation where people were kinda quiet after reading this story again.

So Willimon said,

"I daresay we moderns are a bit put off by the primitive notion ... that God wanted [Abraham] to sacrifice his child like this. Can this ancient story have any significance for us? Then the dam burst. One after another, people told stories from their own lives that reflected God asking them to make incredibly painful sacrifices. Many told them with tears. One middle aged man

responded: "I'll tell you the meaning this story has for me. I've decided that I and my family are looking for another church.... When I look at that God, the God of Abraham, I feel I'm near a real God, not the sort of dignified, businesslike, Rotary Club god we chatter about here on Sunday mornings. Abraham's God could blow a man to bits, give and then take a child, ask for everything from a person and then want more. I want to know *that* God."

Quoted in FORUM LETTER, Feb. 2015, Vol. 44:2.

What kind of a God? A God who would not demand anything more of us than we can bear.

A God who would not test Abraham beyond his ability to trust the mysterious ways of El Shaddai.

A God who would be willing to send His one and only Son into this sin-filled world to sacrifice Himself in order to cancel our debts.

And so He did. 16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." [Jn. 3]

The Letter to the Hebrews comments on this story, as do many other books of the NT: 17 **By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, ... 19 He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.** [Hebr. 11 NRSV]

Resurrection! In the OT!

So here's where we are: **1, God Makes Promises. 2, Did Abraham Really Trust El Shaddai's, God Almighty's, Promise? 3, If Abraham Could Be Cut From the Team, Can We? 4, God Tested Abraham For a Reason.**

Abraham passed the test. What did he learn? On that three day walk, asking over and over, Why, God, why? he saw that he was now trusting Isaac rather than God!

He had put his hope in the gift, not in the Giver! So a ram substituted for Isaac.

El Shaddai tested this patriarch to show him that his faith, his trust, must be nowhere else but in God Almighty. And St. Paul writes:

"[Abraham] believed **God**, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (Gal.3:6)

And we, we are tempted daily to trust in what we produce--our own good works.

Listen, have you seen this? Our ELCA Presiding Bishop, The Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton, titled her March message in *The Lutheran*: "Subtle shift to works righteousness."

She writes of we ELCA Lutherans, "We're pointing in the wrong direction if our **work** becomes the new life instead of a **sign** of the new life."

She concludes, "Jesus didn't die to change behaviors or political systems or institutions. Jesus died to end the fundamental brokenness and estrangement from God that is the result of human sin, our rebellion against God that infects every aspect of our lives."

Final point, Do We Trust the God of Abraham? El Shaddai?

Strange name - - - - - is it the same God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

The answer is yes, God "is the same, yesterday, today and forever."

Therefore, we do well to give glory to the God who gave His only Son for us, as Amy Grant did in her 1982 recording of "El Shaddai"--

Through your love and through the ram
You saved the son of Abraham
Through the power of your hand
Turned the sea into dry land
To the outcast on her knees
You were the god who really sees
And by your might you set your children free

El Shaddai, El Shaddai, El Elyon na Adonai
Age to age you're still the same
By the power of the name
El Shaddai, El Shaddai, Erkamka na Adonai
We will praise and lift you high, El Shaddai
~EL SHADDAI by Michael Card and John
Thompson

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

S.D.g.

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[1737 words] Rockwell 11; Times New Roman 10; Georgia 10