

Dear Members & Friends:

I invite you to read the following passage from Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18 (*Common English Bible*).

¹After these events, the LORD’s word came to Abram in a vision, “Don’t be afraid, Abram. I am your protector. Your reward will be very great.”

² But Abram said, “LORD God, what can you possibly give me, since I still have no children? The head of my household is Eliezer, a man from Damascus.”³ He continued, “Since you haven’t given me any children, the head of my household will be my heir.”

⁴ The LORD’s word came immediately to Abram, “This man will not be your heir. Your heir will definitely be your very own biological child.”⁵ Then God brought Abram outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars if you think you can count them.” God continued, “This is how many children you will have.”⁶ Abram trusted the LORD, and the LORD recognized Abram’s high moral character.

⁷ God said to Abram, “I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land as your possession.”

⁸ But Abram said, “LORD God, how do I know that I will actually possess it?”

⁹ God said, “Bring me a three-year-old female calf, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a dove, and a young pigeon.”¹⁰ Abram took all of these animals, split them in half, and laid the halves facing each other, but he didn’t split the birds.¹¹ When vultures swooped down on the carcasses, Abram waved them off.¹² After the sun set, Abram slept deeply. A terrifying and deep darkness settled over him.

¹⁷ After the sun had set and darkness had deepened, a smoking pot with a fiery flame passed between the split-open animals.¹⁸ That day the LORD made a covenant with Abram: “To your descendants I give this land, from Egypt’s river to the great Euphrates.

As the Church moves toward the fulfillment of God’s new covenant in the cross of Christ, Sunday’s scripture from Genesis gives us an opportunity to reflect upon the covenant with Sarah and Abraham. Genesis 15 explores the significance of God’s promises to Abraham and Sarah about descendants and land. Their names are Abram and Sarai until we come to Genesis 17. In both stories from Genesis 15 and 17, Abraham expresses doubt about God’s promises.

Sarah and Abraham are childless, which means that they are, essentially, futureless. They have been unable to have a child, despite the promise in Genesis 12:2 that God would make of them a great nation. In his desperation, Abraham proposed that he adopt his servant, Eliezer of Damascus, as his heir.

God refused Abraham and Sarah and their plot for adoption, saying that only their naturally born child would be their heir. God took Abraham outside, pointed him to the sky, and urged

him to count the stars. That's how many children you will have. God's promise is abundant. More than the gift of one child, God promises that with the passing of generations, the descendants of Abraham and Sarah would number in the millions, making it even more difficult for Abraham to believe the promise of God.

The highpoint of this Sunday's Genesis story is Genesis 15:6. Abraham believed God's promise. That's the appropriate human response to God's promises – trust, acceptance, and living into the promise.

In our interpretation of this foundational passage of scripture, we need to understand the word "righteousness." "And Abram believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Genesis 12:6, *NRSV*). Righteousness in the Bible is not so much a matter of moral rectitude. Righteousness is all about a working relationship. The Hebrew word for "righteous" or "just" is *Tzedeq*. The word is applied to a functioning or working relationship. Those who are right functioning live by faith and trust in God's promises. Thus, righteousness means living up to the obligations that come with a covenantal relationship. It means doing whatever it takes to sustain an "agreed upon" relationship. "I will be your God, and you will be my people," says the Holy One of Israel. It is God who makes the promise. Again, it's not about moral rectitude. In Genesis 38, Tamar was willing to do anything – including sleeping with her father-in law, Judah – to fulfill her obligation to bear a child for her deceased husband, Er, and thereby continue to covenant to continue the family. In fact, Tamar is called righteous by Judah.

Genesis 12:6 says that Abraham believed God. His "righteousness" was in his trusting the promises of God, even when the outcome of the promise seemed farfetched. In Genesis 15:7-12 and 17-18, Abraham has difficulty trusting the promise of the land: "How am I to know that I will in fact possess it?" God responds by telling Abraham to take a series of animals, cut them in two, and lay each half opposite its counterpart (You can see a similar ritual in Jeremiah 34:17-20). What's this bizarre ritual supposed to mean? Perhaps it demonstrates that God is calling the shots in this Divine-human dialogue.

Abraham goes into a deep sleep. Could this be reminiscent of the sleep that came upon Adam when God took one of his ribs to make Eve in Genesis 2:21? Who knows? Maybe. Note that Abraham sleeps through the rest of the covenant events, thus showing that Abraham contributes absolutely nothing to the making of the covenant. Abraham dreams of a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passing between the cut up animals. Thereby, God made with Abraham and Sarah a covenant, "a promise," saying, "To your descendants I give this land."

God not only freely, solely makes covenant but also reiterates and signifies the covenant, thus helping Abraham and Sarah to believe in the reality of the covenant. The crucifixion of Jesus, toward which we are moving in Lent, is interpreted as the new testament, the new covenant, the new promise. Once again, in Christ, God takes all of the initiative. Our righteousness is only a believing response to the gift of the promise – "I will be your God, and you will be my people." How can we believe such a wonderful promise? We can't without trusting in God's faithfulness to God's promises.

What does all of this mean?

Although we have shown, time and again, that we have difficulty in keeping our promises to God, let alone the promises we have made to other people, the God of Israel and the Church has repeatedly shown a steadfast willingness to be committed to us. God has freely, graciously taken the initiative and bound God's Self to us, first in God's covenant with Abraham and Sarah and then in Jesus, the embodiment of God's new covenant with humanity. This means that God's people can rest assured, confident that our relationship with God is in God's hands, that God has eternally turned toward us and will never let us go (Read Romans 8:31-39). God has promised to be our God. That's the good news, the covenant, upon which our faith is based. We are the people of God's promise.

Thanks be to God alone!

Pastor Greg Rupright