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Friday, March 15, 2019
Year C Lent 2

Genesis 15:1-12,17-18
Philippians 3:17--4:1
Luke 13:31-35

“A Soul Debt”

- God works in mysterious ways, and so does Google at times
 - For instance, this week I had a vague memory of a TV show or movie that included a character who was under a life debt
 - I was working on my sermon...
 - I could not remember specifics, but it felt recent, like maybe Game of Thrones or something else set in a fictional Medieval setting
 - Just couldn't remember
 - So what do you do in this modern world when you half remember something and want to know more?
 - You ask Siri, or Google, or Alexa, or any of the personal robot assistants we have these days
 - Meme: getting the names of my robot assistants mixed up
 - So I picked Google, and I searched for Life Debt, and the first thing that popped up?
 - A link to the **Wookiee** Cultural Center...
 - Yes, Wookiee, like the Wookiee on Star Wars, the one who flew the Millennium Falcon with Hans Solo
 - The Hairy 6 foot tall guy named Chewbacca
 - The one that couldn't speak a language we could understand
 - And instead made that unforgettable sound, but everyone seemed to understand anyway
 - [Not going to try to do it]
 - Apparently, there's a whole book out there about the conversation around Star Wars, wookies, and life debts... ¹
 - Why would Google think I was searching for something science fiction?? So mysterious!
 - Did you know that Hans Solo saved Chewbacca from slavery and certain death? Sure you did, everyone does.
 - Ok, so why was I searching for something to do with life debts, before getting terribly distracted by Star Wars fandom?

¹ <https://www.amazon.com/Life-Debt-Aftermath-Star-Trilogy/dp/1101966955>

- It is because of the themes I see today in our readings... did you see the preacher's first thoughts video online?
- Themes about blood oaths, Covenants, Paul's admonitions on righteous living
- And Jesus' comments on Jerusalem
- Maybe life debt isn't the right phrase here- maybe **soul debt** would better describe our situation,
- And be especially suitable for the second Sunday in Lent.
- Let's start with our reading from Genesis, for I think it lays the ground work for later lessons, and is interesting in its own right
 - I am speaking in particular about Abram's interaction with God found in our reading this morning from Genesis
 - It is a very strange reading indeed- there is so little in our culture today that even compares to it
 - Here's what happens:
 - God instructs Abram to bring a cow, a goat, a ram, a turtle dove, and a pigeon
 - Abram brings them, and seems to know exactly what to do with them, which suggests this is a commonly excepted practice
 - He cuts them in two, except the birds, lays them over against each other, and waits
 - When the sun goes down, a smoking fire-pot and a flaming torch pass between the pieces
 - Scripture sums it up by saying, "on that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram"
 - We are left wondering what exactly has just happened
- But in the midst of all of the animals and smoking fire-pots, we have in Scripture a fundamental piece to the overall story of God's salvation
 - God, here with Abram is making a promise, a covenant
 - This is no ordinary promise, however, this is serious as life and death
 - The Hebrew word here is "berith", originally referring to a non-biological bond equal to brotherhood ²
 - It is comparable to a blood oath, a unbreakable vow that simulates the unbreakable bond in blood relatives
 - That is broken, was severely punished.

² <http://desperatepreacher.com/sermonbuilder/mar04/1/firstlesson.htm>

- This ritual is the origin of our phrase “the deal is cut”³
- In this ancient ritual, the one who passes through the cut halves is taking a vow that if broken, can expect to become as the animals
- It is not to be taken lightly
- God is making a very serious and long term commitment to Abram
- God will bless Abram, and bless the world through him and his decedents for generations to come.
- Up until this point, Abram has been doing all the work- he has followed God faithfully
 - He has left his home city of Ur at God’s direction⁴
 - He has shared his wealth, tithing ten percent of what he recently acquired in battle back to God
 - Yet God has not blessed him, in particular Abram and Sarai have no children
 - And for this ancient culture, children were of utmost concern
 - This ancient culture’s primary understanding of immortality was biological- you lived on through your children and their children^{5p}
 - But you can hear Abram asking God- if you have not given me this, then how can I consider myself blessed?
 - It is God’s reputation that is at stake⁶- God is the one who has not participated in the agreement so far
 - And so God is the one who makes the unbreakable vow, a covenant
 - God promises to bless Abram with land, and with many decedents
- Now why would this strange vow find its way into Holy Scripture, and why is it important to us today?
 - First, I think it tells us something about how God interacts with us
 - God meets us where we are, and communicates in ways we can understand
 - For Abram, it was a ritual expressing a deep bond and commitment, one that he understood and was meaningful to him
 - And I think God continues to meet us where we are as well

³ <http://montreal.anglican.org/comments/clnt2m.shtml>

⁴ PrRCL 30

⁵ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingaholyadventure/2013/02/the-adventurous-lectionary-the-second-sunday-in-lent/>

⁶ PrRCL 30

- Working within our culture and in ways that we can comprehend, and to which we can relate
- God may not use cut animals and smoking fire pots, but God still communicates today
- By whispering with that small, quiet voice within our hearts and souls
- Giving us a vision of what could be
- Secondly, I think this ritual gives us insight into how God will interact with Israel, and even the larger creation
- God commits to Abram, to creation, and to us.
- Time and time again, even though the Israelites turned away, God remained faithful to the vow made
- God's faithfulness is proven over and over again
- Can you hear Jesus reminding the people of this, that he and God long to bring Jerusalem together
 - as a hen gathers the chicks under her wing for comfort and protection
- Of being disappointed in the rejection he is receiving from God's people, yet unwavering from his purpose
- Even still, this promise from God kept going, even grew and expanded, and keeps going
- God's desire to walk with Abram and to bless the world through him is the same desire God has for us
 - To be in covenant, to be in relationship, and to be blessed
- Living into this covenant is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian
 - God is already fully committed
 - Grace freely given, deal has been cut
 - It was Mother Betsy who last week reminded us of that Grace freely given, and that it is inexhaustible
 - Capable of redeeming even the very worst
 - This grace that offers peace in life, even when circumstances try their best to steal it from us
 - Grace that is deep like a river, wide like an ocean, and comes with no strings attached
 - Grace that permeates our life here, and will carry us on after our death
 - Grace for which we can only respond with gratitude, and with a deep desire make the best of this gift, and of our lives
 - Perhaps it is like a soul debt- not one where the debtor is pulling our strings and calling in the debt

- But one where we freely respond in the only way we can to what God has given
- God is still in the covenant business- the deal is still cut
- It certainly looks a little differently to us than it did to Abram, but the good news is still the same
- I don't know- maybe that Google search was on to something
- That wookiee, he became a symbol in the Star Wars universe of loyalty, compassion, and faithfulness to the person who saved him from slavery and certain death
- I believe you and I are in a similar situation, owing God a great deal, and we should be wanting nothing more than to do everything we can to say thank you
- As we progress through this wilderness journey we call Lent
- As we turn toward God through fasting and spiritual inventories, and prayer practices
- This is why we do it all- to say thanks, to try and walk closer to God who has blessed us beyond our knowing
- May we find our hearts warmed with gratitude for what we have been given
- And a deep desire to love as God loves, and to live as citizens of God's Kingdom
- To be the people God has called us to be.

Amen.