Introduction to the Morning Lesson

I sometimes wish that I could still remember how to read biblical Hebrew like I did when I first learned it many years ago in seminary. But like all skills not practiced regularly, foreign language skills do not last. I do remember, however, when we were learning Hebrew, that today’s text was one of the chapters we slogged through word by word and even vowel by vowel. We did so because Genesis 15 is a pivotal chapter in Abram’s story (God doesn’t rename him Abraham until chapter 17) and as you know, the three great monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—all trace their roots to Father Abraham.

Many themes in the Bible connect to this one chapter. It talks about God making covenant with people and the Bible is filled with the idea of covenant, covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and David, and Christians celebrate the new covenant in Jesus Christ. This chapter also talks about God’s promise of land and descendants—major themes in the Bible. The struggle for a divinely promised land is still being played out in Israel and Palestine today. And the apostle Paul based his understanding of faith on this chapter. When he wrote in Ephesians 2.8-9, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast,” he was restating his understanding of Genesis 15.6.

So for many reasons, this is a critically important chapter in the Bible, even in the Lenten season. Most Lenten sermons are from the gospels and relate some part of the story of Jesus. But those who put the lectionary together selected Genesis 15 for the Old Testament lesson on the Second Sunday in Lent because it’s about darkness. In Lent we journey into the dark, into the shadow of the cross. Yet Genesis 15 reminds us that even in the shadow, even in terrifying darkness, there is the promise of light and the presence of God. Let’s read it in Genesis 15.

Genesis 15.1-21 (NRSV)

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 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. 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 judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward 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, theKenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.”

**How do we know that we can trust God?**

Abram fears he cannot trust God’s promise. That’s why God starts off saying, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield.” “Do not be afraid” is something we hear dozens and dozens of times in the Bible.¹ In fact, “fear not” may be the message of the Bible, but Abram is afraid because he’s just not sure that God really will keep the promise that Abram will have many descendants.²

“Please give me a sign, God, so I know I can trust you.”

God says, “Okay, Abram, go outside and try counting the stars. I know you can’t count that high but maybe you’ll get the point. You’re going to have kids and grandkids and great grandkids and great, great grandkids, and on and on and on. Trust me.”

Looking out at the starry night, I think Abram tried to trust. The text says “he believed the Lord.” But his belief and his fear were fighting and fear seemed to be winning. I think Abram thought, *Okay, stars are a cool sign, but they’ll be out again tomorrow night and the next night and the next. Do the stars really mean anything or are they just stars?*

Of course, God knew Abram’s troublesome doubts and said, “Remember, Abram, I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.”

“But God,” Abram burst out, “how am I to know that I shall possess it?”

So Abram was so much in the dark that God then did something drastic. Fortunately God did not tell him to just suck it up and “get over it.” No, God told him to gather some animals—

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¹ In the NRSV “do not be afraid” occurs 70 times and “do not fear” occurs 58 times. “Do not be frightened” occurs 4 times. “Not fear” (alone without “do”) occurs 8 times. These total 140 times and other verses with similar intent but different words or syntax likely increase the count at least a few more dozen.

² [Genesis 12.1-3](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%2012.1-3&version=NRSV): Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”
heifer, goat, ram, turtle dove, pigeon—typical creatures for ancient practices of animal sacrifice. Then Abram cut them in two, except the birds, and placed them on the ground in two rows with spaces between them. And he sat there, probably with a stick, chasing away other birds swooping in looking for an easy dinner. The point, I think, is when we’re in the dark, doubting, and depressed, God knows it’s better to do something than just sit stewing in our troubles.

So God got Abram busy. Then it got really dark. I think this is where the text gets closest to us. It may be about covenant or land and descendants. It may even be about faith. But listen to the words: the sun went down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. Was it a dream, a trance, a nightmare? We don’t know, but he was in the dark and we can identify with that.

Let’s just call it a bad dream. We all have them. I had a discomfiting dream a few nights back. It’s unwise for pastors to talk too much about their dreams but this one is relatively safe. I was moving somewhere and leaving a church where I had served. It wasn’t actually the church in Sudbury, Massachusetts from which I retired in June 2014. It was more a blend of several churches I served. What was strange is that I still had to get all my stuff out of the building—books, files, pulpit robe, and so forth. And “they”—not sure who “they” were—had taken away my key, so I couldn’t get into the building to get my stuff.

Then a good friend showed up. She had a key and let me in, but all my stuff was gone. Apparently “they” had thrown it away. I thought, That’s not very nice. I was pretty upset about it. Why would “they” do that to me?

When I woke up that morning I was still upset. I wondered what that dream meant. Did it mean anything? Or was it just my brain, as some brain researchers suggest, just sloughing off random bits of memory no longer needed?

Strange thing, dreams. Of course, some dreams are more than strange. They are frightening. We call them nightmares, which derives from the Old English mære, a mythological demon or goblin who torments others with frightening dreams. Psychologists don’t think bad dreams are caused by demons or goblins, but they know whatever causes them, almost everyone over the age of five has nightmares, as often as once a week, even more often in teenagers. The good news is we have fewer bad dreams as we get older. So that’s something to say for aging.

Abram had a truly nasty dream that night in the dreadful dark. It was the kind of nightmare, as one writer expresses it, “in which something horribly dark and heavy just sits itself on your chest and takes your breath away.”

But this time, in the midst of Abram’s dark dream, God was teaching him how to trust. In his dream Abram watched what God did. God looked like a smoking fire pot and a flaming
torch—light! And Abram watched God pass between the pieces of the sacrificed animals on the ground.

In that ancient world, when two parties wanted to make a binding agreement with each other, they would cut in two the sacrificial animals and lay them on the ground. Then **both parties to the agreement** would walk between the separated animal carcasses to seal the deal. It was saying in effect, “May the fate of these animals be mine if I don’t keep my word.” It’s what we meant when were kids and said, “Cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye.” We didn’t mean it and we would not have done it. But we said it to show we were serious. The cutting of an ancient covenant was truly serious because breaking it meant literally offering up one’s very own life.

So who walked between the split carcasses? Not Abram! He was asleep. He was in the dark. He was totally incapable of making or keeping this covenant. Who cut the covenant? A smoking fire pot and a flaming torch. Light. God. It means God binds his very life to us no matter what. God in effect declares, “If I fail to keep my promises, you may do to me as we have done to these animals here slaughtered.” That’s what Abram saw and it taught him to trust.

My friends, when you are in the most terrifying darkness, when you feel the most alone and afraid, God is not far away from you. Even in that moment, God is binding covenant with you.

Still, we ask how are we to know that we can trust God? Like Abram we must watch what God does. It’s why we go this Lenten way to Good Friday whereupon in Jesus Christ, God offers up God’s own life as the pledge of faithfulness. We need to watch what God does and then we learn how to trust.

We all know that darkness is real. It’s real in the Bible and it’s real in our lives. We go through seasons in life and some are blessed and joyous. In other seasons we face difficulty and suffering and always we wonder and worry about the journey’s end. What will become of us? Will we make it?

Perhaps when such questions assail us, when the night seems never ending, when doubt

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5 Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982) 149-150. “Here the covenant is simply a promise. It is one-sided as a commitment on the part of God to Abraham and exacts no comparable allegiance from Abraham to God. It is a commitment of free grace. The unqualified commitment of God in verses 18-21 has its counterpart in verse 6. In both passages it is affirmed that God’s movement toward Abraham is free and unconditional. Abraham need only trust.”

6 This seems to fit Karl Barth’s view of how the Word of God comes to us. “In the word acknowledgment, as we have already said, there lies the relation to a control, a necessity. We have to remember that the Word of God has power, power as word has power, the power of God’s truth, the power of His promise, claim, judgment and blessing which are its content, but power. Acknowledgment of the Word of God by man is naturally, then, approval of the Word of God by man, yet not approval on the basis of persuasion between equals, but the kind of approval that arises on the basis of obedience, of submission between those who are utterly unequal. To have experience of God’s Word is to yield to its supremacy. Whether it comes to us as Law or Gospel, as command or promise, it comes at any rate in such a way as to bend man, and indeed his conscience and will no less than his intellect and feeling. It does not break him; it really bends him, brings him into conformity with itself.” Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I, 1, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975) 206.

piles on doubt, we can do nothing better that to pray Cardinal Newman’s famous prayer:

O Lord, support us all the day long of this troublous life,
until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes,
and the busy world is hushed,
and the fever of life is over, and our work is done.
Then, in your mercy, grant us a safe lodging
and a holy rest and peace at the last.

In other words, the prayer expresses in worship language what several Presbyterian confessions express in creedal language: “In life and in death we belong to God.” That is God’s promise and we can trust it.

“I am your shield,” God told Abram. The Hebrew word \textit{shield} comes from the same root as the word \textit{garden}. God is our shield. Though we rest secure in no other place, our safe lodging, our holy rest, and our peace at last are in the holy garden of God. And Jesus Christ went to the cross and gave his life to prove it’s true.

Thanks be to God.