

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18 Pastor Bill Uetracht 2 Lent 2/28/10

I wonder if you were as intrigued, or as someone else said the other day, “weirded out,” as I was by that strange first lesson from Genesis. This lesson speaks of God telling Abram to get a three-year old ram, a three-year old heifer, a three-year old goat, a pigeon, and a turtle dove and to cut all of those animals in half--except for the birds--and to place the halves up against each other. How bizarre! And then, we are told, when the sun went down, even though the earlier part of the reading had said that it was well into the night, a smoking firepot and a flaming torch passed between the pieces of the animals. This is really weird. But there is something in this reading that keeps calling my name, my heart, my voice.

A part of the reason that this lesson seems so weird to us has to do with the fact that we are so removed from the ancient culture that helped to record this strange rite and really, really far removed from the culture that might have practiced it. It’s obviously a rite that was used to ratify a covenant, an agreement. The smoking firepot and the flaming torch are symbolic of God. God often appears in the Bible in smoke or fire. It is God who is now walking through the pieces of the animals. It is God who is ratifying a covenant.

God is ratifying a covenant he is making with Abram. The story is begun with God telling Abram that he will be his shield, his protector. You see, Abram has found himself in foreign territory, being given land that belonged to foreigners. God is reassuring him that even there he will be secure, but Abram isn’t overly reassured because life hasn’t worked out the way he thought it would. He wants a child in the worst way, and the only person who is in his household who could be an heir of his estate is a foreign slave. And so, Abram lays it on the line. This

isn't what he had signed up for. He's a little ticked at God. God then gives Abram a promise: "This slave shall not be your heir; no one but your own very issue shall be your heir. That is to say, one who comes as a result of what flows from your body shall be your heir." And then God took Abram outside and upped the ante. "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them," God says to Abram. "So shall your descendants be. You want a kid. I am giving you a nation." Just like God, isn't it? He tends to be an overachiever, an over-doer, a God whose grace is overly abundant.

And then God continues with his promises. This time the promise includes land. God says to Abram, "I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it." And the Abram *continues* his boldness by asking God how he will know that this land is his, how will God demonstrate that he will make good on his promise. Well, then comes the weird ritual with the chopped up animals. What the weird ritual is saying is that God's promise is good, so good that Abram can rip God into pieces if God is not faithful. Just as the animals have been torn into two you can tear God into, Abram is being told, if God doesn't keep God's word.

Now I know that you might think that I am weird, but I find this reading compelling. The relationship between God and Abram is so dynamic, so honest. The relationship that Abram has with God is based solely on promise. God makes a promise to Abram, and the rest of his life is lived out of that promise. And the response that Abram has to that promise is a life of trust. The Bible says that "Abram believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness." Abram trusted God, and God considered that trust what it means to be in a faithful relationship to him.

The relationship we all have with God is based on the promise of God. When we are baptized we are drenched in the promise of God. We are marked with the cross of Christ and sealed with the Holy Spirit, sealed with the promise of the very life of God, the very energy of God. Our whole life is lived in light of promise. And as was true for Abram, it is also true for us. Promise is not a guarantee. Promise is not a for-sure thing. Promise is not a matter of certainty. It is a matter of trust. The call in life is not to live by certainty, but to live by trust.

If you think about it, every important relationship we are involved in—our relationships with our spouses or our partners, our relationships with our children, our relationship with a community like the church—all of these relationships are built on promise and depend upon trust. They are risky things. They are not a matter of certainty. No prenuptial agreement will take away the risky character of marriage. To be married is to enter into something very risky, something that relies on and depends upon trust. It is not and will never be a matter of certainty. Nor will our relationships with our kids ever be a matter of certainty. Nor will our relationship with the church. It is phenomenally risky to give yourself to a community. Sometimes it is even hard to walk in the door. It is hard to sit yourself down next to people you don't know, reach out to people who could hurt you, could reject you. It is a vulnerable thing to connect you to a community of faith.

Sometimes I wonder if the rituals we create for marriage or church life ought not to be a bit weirder, more indicative of the tough character of promise-filled relationships. The risk of relationship can tear us into two, can hurt us deeply. The risk of relationship can require great sacrifice. Oh, when we get married, when we join the church it all feels so good. And our rituals tend to support that good

feeling. Everything is pretty. Everything is organized. Everything is clear. Everything is romantic. Nothing is messy. Nothing is bloody. Nothing, except for the predictable overindulgence in alcohol, is risky. But this entering into relationship is shaky business, fragile business, business that may require great sacrifice, business that sometimes may get us a little bloody, more than a little hurt. When we walk down the aisle of relationship we are walking down the aisle of promise, we are walking between the signs that indicate that we are ready to lay ourselves on the line, ready to sacrifice, ready to be a part of the tough stuff.

Now don't get me wrong, and I do not want to be misunderstood. I am not at all suggesting that there aren't some relationships that don't need to come to an end--relationships with spouses or partners, friends, or even church communities. Obviously, there are relationships that take the very life out of life. There are relationships where trust is so badly violated that nothing can redeem them. Sometimes we need to shake the dust off the feet of some of our relationships. Yet still, it is a risky thing to be in relationship. Relationship is not a matter of certainty. It does not come with a guarantee. Relationship is messy. It depends upon promise. It lives out of trust.

You know, as we sense that the plot is thickening in our gospel lesson for today, we see that Jesus will not back down from the messiness and the sacrifice that his commitment to God and the people he has served requires. Herod, the fox, that is to say, as John Petty describes him, "a mere varmint," will not stop Jesus from what is his mission. Some would-be power monger will not stop Jesus from doing what his life of love has brought him to. Today, tomorrow, and the

next day he must be on his way. Like the great prophets before him, he, **the** great prophet, must die in Jerusalem, the city that God had been reaching out to forever with love, gathering them under his wings, as a hen gathers her chicks. But the people of this city would not give in to the vulnerability of love, would not give into the riskiness of the relationship with a loving God. And by the way, I sense that this is the toughest thing for many people when it comes to relationship, giving in to the vulnerability of being loved. Sometimes that requires letting go of too much control. The people of Jerusalem would not let go. They would live life only on their own terms. God would reach out with a promise, but they would not live out of trust.

Not true for Jesus. He is going to Jerusalem because he trusts. At his baptism and on the mountain of transfiguration he was told that he was the beloved son of God, he was saturated with and filled by the promise of God. That promise was what he based his life on, even to the point of giving his life up on a cross, the cruel instrument of torture reserved for criminals. Although innocent, he died the death of a guilty one.

There are no guarantees. Life lived with God is risky. Life lived with God can take us to vulnerable places. Life with God is life lived based on promise, a life that invites us to trust.

You know what is reassuring to me in the midst of all of this? It is God who walks down the aisle between the animals that have been cut in half. This isn't weird; this is wonderful. It is God who is laying his life on the life. It is the very heart of God that finds itself hanging between two men being crucified on crosses. It is God who is saying that if he doesn't keep his promises what has been done to these animals can be done to him. God is saying that his promises are trustworthy. I suppose

as we watch Jesus die on Good Friday and then experience him be raised from the dead we will agree. Today and always we live in light of the promise of God. That is a promise worth resting our lives on.