

CASKET EMPTY

Part 2—Abraham

Genesis 15:1-6

Rev. Jim Zazzera ~ September 24, 2017 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

15 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.” ²But Abram said, “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” ³And Abram said, “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” ⁴But 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.” ⁵He 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.” ⁶And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

(Genesis 15:1-6, *NRSV*)

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In the last decade in America there has been a huge upsurge in things like genealogical research, in DNA testing, in people trying to “find their roots” We seem to want to know who are ancestors are. Perhaps it is because in this increasingly fragmented world we are seeking a deeper understanding of who we are and where we come from. Or perhaps it is just curiosity.

For me, the most interesting thing about our ancestors is their personality and character and it is fascinating to see how they lived their lives. Maybe you had an uncle who was a dedicated public servant and became a legislator. Maybe your grandmother was a tenacious woman who became the CEO of a major company. Maybe far back in your history your forbears showed great endurance when they suffered as slaves in this country. Maybe you have a distant relative who used his keen intelligence to make a living on the margins of society. Maybe you are so proud of your history you tell everyone about your great-great grandfather and grandmother, or maybe you are so embarrassed you avoid all discussion of those who preceded you.

Today’s Bible passage points us to a man who is perhaps the most important ancestor in religious history. Jews, Christians, and Muslims all claim Abraham as their forefather, as a common ancestor.

Today’s passage is all about that common ancestor. But before we talk more about this person, let me step back for a moment to assess where we are in our preaching today.

As those of you who were here last week know, we are building on something we were taught by Carol Kaminsky, our Fall Retreat speaker this year. Carol has created a framework to help us understand the overarching structure, the redemptive story of the whole Bible. She gives us the phrase “CASKET EMPTY” to describe scripture.

This phrase is an acronym that points to the various periods we see in biblical history and helps us to see their import. As you might remember, the word CASKET outlines the story of the Old Testament, moving from Creation, to Abraham, to Sinai, to Kings, to Exile, to Temple. The word EMPTY then outlines the story as it continues in the New Testament, from Expectation, to Messiah, to Pentecost, to Teaching, and finally ending with Yet-to-Come. It’s okay if many of these words don’t make sense to you now because we’ll take them up one at a time along the way.

Last week we talked about the “C” in CASKET which stands for “creation” In his preaching, Pastor Jeff reminded us about the work of creation, that the Lord alone is the abundant, generous creator of all that is, especially humanity which is made in God’s image. Because of human sin God’s creation is fallen and corrupt but even from the very moment sin entered the world, God was already enacting God’s redemptive plan to make everything right again.

Today we (obviously) are talking about Abraham. We are looking at who he was and how he and his family chose to relate to the LORD God—to the God whose name was the unpronounceable word—that we sometimes say as YAHWEH. Today’s passage is as good a place as any to begin to think about the person and period reflected in chapters 12-50 of the book of Genesis, this first book of the Bible.

If you read these stories you will discover many things about Abraham. Abraham is considered the “father” of the Jewish people. He was a man who lived Mesopotamian city of Ur and had no knowledge of this LORD God, this one who would become the God of the

Hebrews. Abraham was married to a woman named Sarah, and this is really their joint story, they traveled this whole journey together.

When we first meet him, he and his wife are quite old. Abraham himself is 75 years old when he responds to God's call. His wife and he have no children (Sarah is said to be "barren"), and now have no prospects of a family because of their age.

In the first scene of his life in scripture (in Genesis 12), Abraham and Sarah are called by the LORD God to leave their home in Ur and travel to Canaan (modern day Israel/Palestine), a land promised to him.

Now, Abraham was not a particularly remarkable man. As our speaker Carol Kaminsky pointed out, Abraham was simply a "75 year old idol worshipper" who had never heard of the LORD god. Yet in the very beginning of his story, Abraham (here Abram) is called by God:

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. 2 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. 3 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." 4 So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. 5 Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan.¹

We are not told why God chose Abraham. There is no indication that he special or particularly righteous. All we know is that God spoke and called, and Abraham responded.

This story of Abraham is almost a prototype for the way God works. Throughout scripture, God so often chooses the unlikely, for no particular reason other than God want to give that person a gift. Here, for Abraham and Sarah, the gift plays out in various promises. Most of the promises are included or inferred in chapter 12:

God says to Abraham & Sarah, "I will give you many descendants." "I will give you land." "I will bless you." "I will be with you." "I will make you a great nation." "I will make you a blessing to all people, to all nations."

The promises given to Abraham are overwhelming, they are truly amazing, And don't miss this – the promises are given unconditionally! There is nothing expected of Abraham. Again, God just gives them as a gift.

As we look back in Genesis, in the wake of the fall of Adam & Eve, in the shadow of humanity's destruction by the flood, after the confusion of language that comes in the building of the tower of Babel, we learn that God has not given up on humanity. For God now chooses Abraham as a vehicle for blessing the earth and its people.

Now let's focus on Genesis 15:1-6. It is a brief passage but perhaps one of the most important texts in all of scripture, because in a nutshell it captures the nature of Abraham's relationship with God and sets the direction for all of God's work with humanity, even setting the direction for us today. Let me try to break it down simply.

First, many years after the promises of Genesis 12, God comes to Abraham in a vision. In verse 1 God brings Abraham assurance that the promises given are still to be fulfilled. God tells Abraham that he will receive the "reward," (the land and children that were offered). God reminds Abraham, even after all these years of waiting, "Do not be afraid."

How many of us find our selves waiting on God's promise to us and descend into fear? Abraham is just like every one of us who seek to trust but find ourselves faltering.

In verse 2 Abraham responds to God, not with meekness but boldly, "what can you give me since I remain childless?" Sarah and Abraham still find themselves without a promised heir, so much so that they are prepared to will their possessions to their adopted slave-boy. Notice that Abraham doesn't take God's seeming failure lying down. He confronts God with the unfulfilled promise.

How many of us take God so seriously that we will challenge God when God doesn't come through for us? Abraham and Sarah are just like every one of us who look our disappointments clear in the face and cry out in pain.

But God responds to Abraham again in verse 4. Notice that God gives no new explanation, does not try to persuade Abraham, does not offer some kind of foolproof argument. God simply reasserts the promise in words, "This man (Eliezer) will not be your heir, but

¹ Genesis 12:1-5, *NRSV*.

a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.”² In other words, you will have land and descendants to inherit and dwell in it. Then God reasserts the promise with a sign, not with a proof, but a living reality, a sacramental moment that points to God’s nature and greatness. “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.”³ Your descendants shall be so many they will be impossible to count!

How many times does God seek to reveal God’s power and beauty and wisdom and love for us? Abraham and Sarah are just like every one of us who are invited to see God’s presence in places and times where we might lose sight of the Holy One.

In verse 6, Abraham responds to God again, this time with a totally different perspective. Notice, we are not told how Abraham came to this decision, but we are simply told that Abraham “believed the Lord.” Just like that - no detailed explanation. There is still no particular proof that he and Sarah will have a son to make this all possible. They still share the pain of their “barrenness.” But in some new way, Abraham has come to rely on the promise-maker. I love how scholar Walter Brueggeman puts it:

[Abraham] has abandoned a reading of reality which is measured by what he can see and touch and manage. The new orientation is not a generalized religious notion that “everything will work out all right.” He is not guilty of pious abdication. Rather, it is a quite specific response to a concrete promise from a known promise maker.⁴

Have you ever been moved at your very core, for no logical reason, to trust the power and presence of God? Abraham is just like every one of us and is given that opportunity to listen when God speaks, to grasp God’s hand when it reaches out to us.

Finally, at the end of that same verse, we hear words that echo from Abraham’s time, into the New Testament, into the time of Luther and the Reformation, into our own day.

It is said Abraham “believed the Lord and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.”⁵ One writer calls this statement “a revolutionary moment in the history

of faith.”⁶ Abraham is “reckoned as righteous.” Abraham is now “designated as one well pleasing in God’s sight.”⁷ Friends, this is what it means to be a person of faith. In fact this is what it means to be a followers of Jesus. Maybe this is what it means to be fully human. To trust in God’s future, even in the death and decay of the present. To trust in God’s future, and live in hope. To give up control in the here and now, while trusting in a new birth, a new path, a new way, a new beginning.

I have included part of Romans 4 in the Next Step this morning, a passage where Paul the Apostle makes this faith of Abraham central to Christian teaching. Paul tells us that faith in the presence of God is what transforms our lives. Trust in God’s gift is what changes us. Giving up control and letting God inhabit and direct us is what gives abundant life.

As Paul puts it, Abraham was not justified (made right with God) by anything he did, by any reality he tried to control, or by any human means he used to bring about God’s purposes. But he became “righteous” (he lived the life that God intended) as a free gift of God. The gift of God is what changes us, and the way for us to begin is to trust that God.

So are we the descendants of Abraham? Are we heirs of the promise? We are descendants in as much as we share in his faith in the LORD God. You see, it was God’s gift that Abraham received in faith that changed (or perhaps set) the course of history. Abraham and Sarah’s child was not a child of the flesh for Isaac could not have been born by human means, but was a child of promise who existed because of God’s gift. We too are children of promise, and heirs of Abraham because of our faith, our trust in the LORD god.

Let me end with one small insight about our lives today. We live in a troubled world. We are residents of a nation with a fractured political system, fractured communities, fractured lives. We see hatred, we see lies, we see violence. We see one group oppressing another, we see many without hope.

We look around and it all seems like one big mess. We grieve at hurricanes, and floods, and earthquakes. We are overwhelmed by technology, we seek relief with all manner of substances, our many losses push us to despair. Many of us find it hard to believe that God is anywhere to be found. What happened to the God who cares about the mourners, the hungry, the impoverished, the imprisoned? Where is God in this mess?

² Genesis 15:4, *NRSV*.

³ Genesis 15:5, *NRSV*.

⁴ *Interpretation: Genesis*, Walter Brueggemann, p. 144.

⁵ Genesis 15:6, *NRSV*.

⁶ *Interpretation: Genesis*, Walter Brueggemann, p. 145.

⁷ *Interpretation: Genesis*, Walter Brueggemann, p. 145.

I don't have an answer for any of this. But perhaps we do well to remember Abraham & Sarah. The ones who came out of their own societal chaos. The people who came from a city full of idols with no knowledge of the LORD God. The couple who lived with the shame and frustration of their inability to have children. The people to whom, for no good human reason, God made promises—land & descendants & more! They were told that they would be blessed and that they would be a blessing. In fact, that last promise may be the most important one of all—that they would be a blessing to the world.

Sarah & Abraham waited and waited and waited—and it seemed like God was never going to come through for them. It seemed like their world and their personal lives would forever be a mess. Yet, in God's time promises were fulfilled. They had a son named Isaac. The land was finally lived in by their heirs. Gifts were given. Abraham & Sarah and their descendants were transformed.

And as was promised, Abraham & Sarah bless us, even to this day. As they were, so may we be blessed. As they became, so may we become—a blessing to all.
Amen.

The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read the text from Genesis 15:1-6 again. What strikes you from this passage?
2. Jim talked about Abraham as one of the most important ancestors in history and our ancestor (by faith). Do you have a particular ancestor that you would like to be like? Or one that you hope you never resemble?
3. What kind of things does God promise Abraham? (In addition to today's passage you may want to look at Genesis 12:1-5.) Which promise is most challenging? Most compelling?
4. The God of Abraham is a promise-making God, a gift-giving God. Talk about a time you received a really wonderful gift. What was your response? What was Abraham's response to God's gift (and promises)?
5. The LORD God's promises to Abraham are unconditional. (Read Genesis 15:7-21 to see how God makes a covenant with Abraham, asking nothing of him.) What does this say about God's

character? What might this say about the character of the people God chooses?

6. Genesis 15:6 says "And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness." What does the writer mean by this statement?
7. The Apostle Paul quotes part of Genesis 15 in Romans 4:1-5. Why does Paul see the example of Abraham as so important for our life in Christ?
8. How does the story of God's relationship with Abraham (and his family) set the tone for the story of redemption portrayed in Scripture? In what way are we descendants of Abraham?

<p style="text-align: center;">Table to Table Question A question for kids and adults to answer together</p>
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<p style="text-align: center;">What is the best gift you ever received? What gift does God want to give us?</p>
