

# **Beware the Vultures! A Sermon on Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18**



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## **Co-missioners,**

Were someone to ask for a definition of Crossings in five words or fewer, we might put it like this. “We push Christ.” And for clarity’s sake, we might take that one word further: “We push Christ Crucified.” There are many reasons for doing this. Today’s offering uses pew-level English to underscore one of them. It also takes a swipe at the plague of Christ-less God-chatter that afflicts churches these days. If what we’re hearing from you is any indication, many more such swipes are needed.

Today’s writer, by the way, is a pastor with Crossings connections. Enough said.

Peace and Joy,  
The Crossings Community

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## **Beware the Vultures!**

A Sermon on [Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18](#)

I want to talk this morning about smoking pots, the death of Jesus—and vultures, of all things. Now if that doesn’t grab your attention, nothing will, I think

All three of these—smoking pots, the death of Jesus, vultures of all things— all of them connect to an issue we share with ancient Abraham, the man we heard about in the first reading just now.

A lot of you know Abraham’s story well. If you don’t, now is the



week of weeks to catch up on it. Genesis 12 to 22—that's where you'll find it in your Bibles at home. (Let's all make a point of putting these to work this Lent.)

As for now, if you're at all foggy on Abraham, it's enough to know that he's one of the top three figures in the entire Bible. He's the one God picks to launch the great project that culminates in Jesus. God's goal in the project is to rescue a world that doesn't know him, that doesn't trust him—a world filled with people bent on doing their own thing at someone else's expense. If that means slaughter and destruction, so be it. We're seeing that attitude on vivid display in Ukraine right now.



Photo by Samer Daboul  
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God, of course, has better things in mind for the people he created and continues to create. His aim is for all the families of the earth to be blessed. That's how he puts it to a random old guy named Abram—70+ years, married, no children—when he interrupts his life with a wild, impossible promise. “Come with me,” God says, “and I’ll give you what you don’t have and can’t have unless I make it happen for you. Children, for one thing. A

reputation for another. A land of your own—imagine that.”

Comes the wonder: Abram hears; Abram trusts; Abram bites. He goes as God directs. And then—nothing seems to happen. A few years in his wife is as far from having a baby as ever she was. The land that God has brought him to still belongs to other people who aren’t about to turn the property over to a passing stranger. Well, of course not.

And all of this is the set-up for today’s episode. Imagine Abraham in his tent one night kicking himself for being the stupid gullible fool who heard voices in his head and gave up something back there for a heap of nothing out here. For all we know he’s had an argument with his wife earlier this evening and she brought this up. Spouses do such things to each other, don’t they.

Anyway, there he lies—unhappy, uncertain—and suddenly the voice of God again. The same voice, the same God, who talks to you through his word when your doubts are deep and you wonder, say, why you waste your time and money on this pointless church thing.

“Abram” the voice says. Listen up. Don’t be afraid. I’ve got your back. Your faith in me is *going* to pay off.”

And so says God to you this morning. “Don’t be afraid.” That’s God’s favorite way of starting a conversation with people who are second-guessing their faith in his goodness and dependability. You can see this all through the Bible.

So how does Abram respond to this? Well, by whining, of course. Perhaps you caught that. If not, look again later. You’ll catch Abram second-guessing God, the way we keep doing—the way we can’t help but do. No matter. God refuses to be offended. He simply takes Abram outside. He shows him the stars of the night

sky blazing as they do in a land where there's no electric light, and with that God repeats his promise of all the children to come.

God does the same, of course, with the promises he made to you when you were baptized. He keeps repeating them.

As for Abram, he suddenly trusts the Lord, it says. And with that God claps his hands, as you heard. "You're all right,"



Photo by Lisa Fotios  
<https://www.pexels.com/photo/photo-of-person-wearing-ring-4124315/>

God says. And so God says whenever he catches a genuine "Amen" welling up in any of you when *you* hear his promises. God says this even though he knows all too well that the doubting isn't done, not with Abram, and most certainly not with us.

That's why, in Abram's case, God follows up on this with yet another repeat of his promise. This one happens on what seems to be the next evening as the sun is going down. You noticed it, I'm sure—this strange, eerie ceremony in which a torch and a smoking pot float down a corridor marked out by the halves of butchered animals. No one knew really had a clue what this was

about until a hundred years ago or so. That's when archeologists deciphered texts from one of the imperial powers of the ancient Near East, the Hittites, and there they found descriptions of a ceremony like this. It was used to ratify solemn agreement-covenants, as we call them-between Hittite kings and their princely vassals. The vassal-the underling, as you might say-would make commitments to the king in exchange for protection, and as a sign that he'd follow through on them he'd walk down exactly such a corridor marked off by butchered animals. This was the message: "you can do to me as you did to these animals if I don't keep my word."

One of the most breathtaking things about God-the real God; the God we have in Christ Jesus-is the way he lowers himself to our level, and then for our sake, for our salvation, he goes even lower than that. That's what God is doing is in this episode with Abram. For Abram's sake-for his salvation, for the shoring up of his faith-God takes on the role of the vassal, the underling. God is in the torch, the smoking pot, that passes through the corridor. God is the One who says, "Do to me as you've done to the creatures if I don't follow through on what I've told you."

This morning you and I will hear God saying to us in Christ, through Christ: "This is my body given for you; this is my blood shed for you. Remember when you eat and drink how faithless sinners butchered me because they thought I wouldn't follow through. Remember even more how I let them do that. For your sake, for your salvation-for the shoring up of your faith today-I let them do that."



Photo by MART Productions  
<https://www.pexels.com/photo/golden-chalice-on-table-beside-a-priest-in-green-chasuble-7219516/>

That's one of many things that God keeps telling us in the blessed Sacrament. And my-oh-my do we need to hear it, not once, not every now and then, but over and over.

We're still in this position of Abraham, you see. Like him, "we walk by faith and not by sight." That's how St. Paul puts it. If anything we have it tougher than Abraham did. That's because the promises God made when we were baptized are even bigger than the ones he made to Abraham, huge as they were. Every Sunday we recite them in the creed: the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, the life everlasting—a life, by the way, that embraces people of every time and every place, all the families of the earth forever blessed.

But since when do we see this? Instead we find the families of the earth constantly at each other's throats. What else is the news about day after day? And it's not just Russia brutalizing Ukraine, horrible as that is. It's the misery that overshadows the corner of the earth where we live, one group pitted against the other depending on how much money they have, what politics



they prefer, what skin tone God gave them. All too many of us are sick or weak, too many are poor, we're all bound to die. Hardly a week goes by without me hearing from somebody who's wondering where God is, and why, when he promises good things, they don't see him following through. Even pastors have their dark hours of doubt, like Abraham in his tent that first night. Now and then I've heard of a pastor who has simply packed it in.

Meanwhile, God does things God's way; and as Isaiah famously said, God's ways are not our ways, his thoughts are not our thoughts. That's especially so when it comes to promise-keeping. We all look for signs of his presence, his goodness, that are as bright as the stars in the sky on a dark night, as vivid and certain as the first smile of a newborn healthy baby. More often what we see of God's gracious activity is as murky as the smoking pot in Abram's second vision. A bit of bread. A sip of wine from a chintzy plastic cup. A reminder of that crucified man who died in the darkness with all the world against him.

But that much we have. That much we've got to have—this murky glimpse of the Son of God keeping God's word as he pays the ultimate price for our ongoing disappointment with God.

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Which brings me finally—at last—to the vultures.

Did you catch that bit about the vultures in that Abraham story? Perhaps not. Our translation didn't use the word. It



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called them birds of prey instead. A better translation calls them carrion birds. You see a lot of them on rural roads in the spring when animals are stirring and crossing the highway at the wrong moment. A few years ago I hit a vulture with my car. It swooped up too late from the carcass it was feeding on at roadside. When I found out later that my grill wasn't damaged, I didn't feel at all bad. No one likes vultures. They're ugly creatures. Ugly and mean.

Abram deals with vultures in that eerie episode with the torch and the smoking pot. You might remember how he lays out the carcasses of the slaughtered animals and the vultures circle down to eat their fill. Abram drives them off. It's a good thing he does. How will he get to see this astounding sign of God's commitment to him if the carcasses aren't there?

St. Paul dealt with vultures in his day too. The kind without

wings, you might say. In the [second reading this morning](#) he calls them enemies of the cross of Christ. They're like the people Jesus himself is grieving over in [the Gospel reading](#). They want nothing to do with a Messiah who does things God's way, as opposed to their way. Their way is the way of the full belly, the glistening health, the sparkling family, the brilliant talented kids who make all the right sports teams and attend the best schools. That, they say, is how you know that God is in your corner and on your side. You win. You don't lose. Some even go so far as to build churches, if that's what you call them, where every sign of a crucified Christ is carefully left out, no crosses anywhere to be seen. "You don't want people feeling bad"—that's the theory, I suppose. Sunday is happy time. It's preening time. "God look at me and don't you dare be disappointed."

In places like these, no one want the carcass of Jesus hogging the limelight and spoiling the show. In swoop the vultures to take it away.

As for you, watch out for these vultures in years to come. Avoid them. Drive them off if you have to. If someone goes on and on about God without ever bringing up the death of Jesus—this happens too much in too many churches, even Lutheran ones—find someone else to listen to.

We all need to see—we've got to see—what Abram saw, how God accepted the burden of death to keep his promises.

We've got to see what Peter saw, and John and Mary and later Paul: how in the awful terrifying darkness of Good Friday God gave us all the reason of reasons for trusting him; for staking our lives on the future he's determined to give us; for doing this even and especially when we can't see any other sign of a future for us in this brutal, broken world we're living in

today.

Keep looking at Christ. Christ crucified in particular. That's where faith in God begins and ends. I mean the faith of Abraham, the kind that moves Almighty God to say of you, "All right!", and again, "Don't be afraid!"

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**Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use**

A publication of the Crossings Community