

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, Old Testament, Year C

PROMISES, PROMISES, PROMISES

Genesis 18:1-10a

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 11)

Analysis by Steven E. Albertin

The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. 2He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. 3He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. 4Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. 5Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on – since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." 6And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." 7Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. 8Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

9They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." 10Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him.

DIAGNOSIS: Broken Promises

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): The Unfulfilled Promise

Abraham is of waiting. God had promised him a son. Abraham was willing to take God at God's word. He was even willing to submit to circumcision. But the promise still remains unfulfilled. He is now an old man. Sarah too is wrinkled, withered and long past the age of childbearing. As Abraham sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day, sweat running down his brow and still sore from his circumcision, he must have wondered if this is all there would be: a life once filled with hope and expectation, but now depleted with time running out.

When three strangers approach, Abraham is inexplicably eager to see them and serve them. He leaps to his feet (no easy accomplishment given his recent surgery) and offers an over-the-top expression of Semitic hospitality. He promises a little water and bread but then offers a sumptuous feast. Maybe it was a desperate expression of his disappointment in the promise that remained unfulfilled? Or maybe it was motivated by some fleeting hope that these strangers might have some word on how God proposes to make good on the still unfulfilled promise?

Abraham is not unique. We all have struggled with unfulfilled promises. Our lives have not turned out the way we had hoped or planned. We sit on the front porch in the summer heat, sweat burning our eyes, wondering what has happened to our life. Once there was so much promise. Now so many promises are unfulfilled.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): The Unbelievable Promise

Maybe Abraham regrets that he ever believed in the promise in the first place. Who is he kidding? He and Sarah are candidates for the nursing home, not the maternity ward. Why did he think life could be any different? He should have never fallen for the absurd implications of a promise that was simply unbelievable from the get-go. His excessive hospitality for the three strangers perhaps reveals that he has more confidence in the

ancient customs of the desert than the ridiculous and unbelievable promise of a God who is either unwilling or unable to keep his word.

Abraham's doubts are also ours. The disconnect between our lives and God's promises is massive. Age, disease, failure and rejection sap the life out of us. God's promises of love ring hollow. Not only do we question our ability to believe, but we question God's ability to keep them.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): The Unlivable Promise
Old, childless and tired of waiting, Abraham sits lifeless in the door of his tent in the heat of the day. He just can't go on any more. His spirit is as withered as his body. How can he live with this promise? It promised so much, but it has left him with so little. He cannot live any more with the disconnect. He is as good as dead.

So are we when we have given up. In the midday heat, it feels that the life has been sucked out of us. It may not be that we are childless but we do have a long list of unrealized hopes and unfulfilled dreams. Continuing to live like this is no longer tenable. Not only have we given up on God but for all intents and purposes God has given up on us.

PROGNOSIS: Keeping Promises

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): The Promise Kept
Abraham may just have been doing his duty. By welcoming these strangers with hospitality that more than surpassed the typical cultural expectations, it was a diversion from the gloom. What else was there to believe in when your life is petering out in your old age with no legacy to leave behind? The surprise is that in these three strangers from the desert God shows up once again to renew the promise. We know the story. This time the promise is kept. The next spring Abraham and Sarah have the long

promised son, Isaac. It turns out that Abraham's lavish hospitality was entirely appropriate for the occasion. In these three strangers, God demonstrated God's dogged determination to never give up on God's people. Despite Abraham's despair, God would not despair of him.

Of course, this surprising turn of events portends God's greatest example of promise keeping. God again shows up hidden not in three strangers from the desert but in the carpenter's son from Nazareth. As those three ordinary travelers surprised Abraham and Sarah with their announcement, so this ordinary traveler from Galilee surprises the world with his incredible announcement: Despite the disappointment that fills this world, the Kingdom of God has arrived! Repent and believe the good news! What makes it such good news is that God will never stop befriending the losers who have given up on life and God.

Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution): The Promise Believed

This text ends abruptly with an announcement from the strangers. When they return in the spring, Sarah will have a son. We need to read on beyond this text to see the reaction of Abraham and Sarah. She laughed . . . from disbelief and joy. Abraham believed again. The birth of Isaac confirmed that their trust in the promise of God had not been in vain. Abraham continues clinging to this promise even in the face of God's startling command that Abraham sacrifice this long awaited son of the promise (Genesis 22).

God continues to speak God's word of promise today. Even though there is often a huge disconnect between our lives and what God wants life to be, God continues to create faith in the Promise, again and again. God comes even in the heat day when we have given up, continuing to speak through the voices of ordinary human beings . . . at the font, through the meal, in the Book .

. . all proclaiming the promise that makes it possible for us still to believe.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): The Promised Lived
There is another way to look at Abraham's unexpected hospitality. It could have been more than just keeping the cultural norm of hospitality. Even though Abraham did not know who the strangers were, he must have believed that they had some important news for him. That he found the strength in the heat of the day to leap to his feet and run to greet them must have been motivated by the hope that they had something to offer him. Maybe these three strangers would show how God would make good on the promise of a son? This proleptic faith trusted God's promise in spite of evidence to the contrary. Even in these adverse conditions, he trusts that God will do the impossible. Such faith in God's promise moved him to an incredibly generous expression of hospitality. A little bread and water became a feast of cakes, curds, milk and meat. Abraham lived the promise even before its truthfulness had been confirmed. He lived generously in anticipation of God's generosity.

We too can live life trusting God's promise in anticipation of its generous fulfillment. Like Abraham, we can welcome strangers with generous hospitality in anticipation of that day when all will be welcomed to the lavish feast that will know no end. We live as if the promise was already fulfilled. Which, of course, it is . . . by faith.