

Second Sunday in Lent

BLESSED LIGHT

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

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Analysis by Paul Jaster

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.

7Then he said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess." 8But he said, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" 9He 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." 10He 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. 11And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

12As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. 17When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming

torch passed between these pieces. 180n 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."

DIAGNOSIS: Terrifying Darkness

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Fear of Promises Delayed*

The God of Abraham is a God of promise: land, countless children, God-trusting descendants who will be a blessing to all the nations of the world. But what happens when those promises are delayed and nothing has happened yet? No kids. No land. Just a vague promise in your back pocket and empty heartache. Thus, Abraham's fear and lament. We also are afraid and lament whenever the promises of God are delayed. Lent is a season of loud lament.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Un-right Trust*

When the powerful promises of God are delayed, our first instinct is to take matters into our own hands, settle for something less and seek an alternative future. Abraham resigns himself that his servant Eliazer will be his heir. Sarah arranges for a surrogate mother in her maidservant Hagar. Abraham jeopardizes the promise (twice!) by claiming Sarah is his sister rather than his wife in order to save his own skin. Unrighteousness has nothing to do with the lack of virtue or with immorality. It has to do with promises and trust: Do we do it the right way, and trust the powerful promises of God, or do we do it the un-right way and not? Those terms are set by God. Promises are meant to be trusted. And for us the powerful promises of God to Abraham have been anteed up by the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The whole New Testament

adds that Jesus is the third (and key) promise to Abraham fulfilled. Jesus is that one particular descendant of Abraham who brings a blessing to all the nations of the world and who opens up a whole new set of promises in addition to the first. The Apostle Paul will spend all of Romans 4 pointing out that the right way to respond to a promise is by trusting it—like Abraham finally did.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : A Terrifying Darkness

Without trust in God's promises through Christ, God is a "deep and terrifying darkness." Even the newly-declared-righteous, believing Abraham must be put into a deep sleep at night before God dare appear to make any additional revelation to him. Otherwise, by the open light of day, the terrifying darkness will consume him. The same thing happens with the open light of God's law. A sunshine law, an honest appraisal of our faith, is terrifying and deadly. Without Jesus added to the equation, this deep and terrifying darkness one day becomes permanent.

PROGNOSIS: A Dazzling Display

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : An Odd God

Not only does God repeat his promise again (and again...and again), but God engages in an odd ritual that could come right out of a "Godfather" movie. No where else does a god himself walk between a (symbolically) complete set of sacrificial animals that have been "cut" in two. The message is emphatic: "Let ME be cut in two and sacrificed and killed before I break the covenantal promises I have made." [Maybe this is why the Hebrew scriptures always talks about "cutting a covenant" (rather than just "making" one). The vivid Hebrew verb used with covenants, "to cut," makes its own sharp point; as does snipping off the foreskin in circumcision.] What is so odd on the cross of Jesus is that the God-Father we have in Jesus carries out

this very “oath curse” upon God’s own self. God dies a rending cursed death even though God is the one who keeps the covenant and we are the ones who have mistrusted it. We are the ones who should be severed in two, fitted with concrete boots, and sent to sleep with the fish in the terrifying deep. Yet, God endures the death and darkness meant for us in the person of Jesus. God is so passionate about keeping BOTH sides of the covenant, that God puts his own life on the line in Jesus. God becomes the perfect and complete sacrifice. Jesus expresses this passionate, faithful covenantal love of God in his own lament in today’s Gospel: “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’” Jesus is not out to save his skin but ours. Come back Palm Sunday, Good Friday and Easter.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Right Trust*

As Walter Brueggemann says in his Interpretation commentary on this passage, “The same God who gives the promise makes it believable.” God had not given Abraham any “new information” when the Scriptures say of Abraham, “he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.” The facts on the ground were unchanged. Still no kid. No land. Just more delay. There were no proofs, either. Or, even signs really. God’s weird oath action comes later. And a Bedouin looking at the stars at night...what kind of persuasive sign is that? Every one around the world sees the same sign every day. No, it is God’s word of promise itself said again and again that invites faith and enables belief.

[From Brueggemann: The believing Abraham is the new creation of God’s word of promise. And it parallels the confession of Peter. Abruptly and without explanation of cause, Peter makes this same leap of faith in his confession: “You are the Christ, the Son of

the Living God.” The response of Jesus indicates the amazing miracle which faith is: “Blessed are you, Simon! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” Both the core story in Genesis 15 and Paul’s grounding on it in Romans 4 indicates that faith in the promises of God is considered by God to be righteousness—the right way to respond to God. More Brueggemann: “The future of God’s goodness is open to those who trust in that future, neither holding on to the present nor conjuring an alternative future of their own. Faith is reliance on God’s promise of overcoming the present for a new life.” The point Paul makes is that anyone who has faith in the promises of God like this (now anted up and raised in Jesus Christ) is a “child of Abraham” and therefore an heir of the very promise given to Abraham and a participant in the blessing that God would work through him and his descendents.]

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : One Son & Many Lights Shining

God’s challenge to count the stars is not an exercise in science or math, although some have tried it. Seventy sextillion (7 followed by 22 zeros) is the latest count according to star gazers at the Australian National University (so CNN.com on 7/22/2003). The Aussies claim this is ten times as many stars as grains of sand on all the world’s beaches and deserts. And Aussies should know; they have plenty of both. No, this is a brilliant display of what Abrahamic promise-trusters come to be: “a light to those who are in darkness,” which is repeated in the baptismal charge, “Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your father in heaven.” When promise-trusters do their job and give witness to Jesus who is God’s light (God’s leading star, the Son), then they become lights as well through words and sacramental acts and care and service. And that completes the promise. Not just the kids and land that were Abraham’s primary concern, but rather the

blessing that is God's ultimate concern: "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."