

Second Sunday in Lent, March 13, 2022
“The Promise Keeper” (Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18)

If you're like me, you often tend to put the people we read about in the Bible up on a pedestal. We think of them as being larger than life. After all, God talked with them and walked with them and performed great miracles for them. We see them as people of tremendous faith, not at all like us, for we are just common, ordinary people. We sin too much, we doubt too much. And when was the last time God spoke to us from a burning bush or parted an ocean for us?

And so the people of the Bible – especially those of the Old Testament, like Abraham – seem distant and strange, not like the people we are and the people we know. However, they were more like us than we might think. They, too, were just ordinary people. They were capable of great sin, as well as great faith. Doesn't that sound like us? And God didn't always speak to them from a burning bush. Sometimes God spoke through a quiet voice.

Abraham is one of the best examples I know. He was no great preacher, prophet, king, great warrior, or theologian. He was a farmer who was into agriculture, especially livestock. If we want to know what Abraham was like, we just need to look at those in our community who keep cows. Abraham was an ordinary man with ordinary problems. For one, he had no children. And what made that such a problem is that he didn't know anything about an afterlife.

Let's think about that for a moment. Abraham is introduced to us in the twelfth chapter of Genesis. Up to that point, God was still working out the basics of our religion. So Abraham didn't have a religious tradition to step into. He didn't even have the Ten Commandments to guide him. Therefore, he knew nothing of life after death. What he did have, however, was a relationship with God. God told him to do something, and that was it. So, because he didn't know about life after death, he was particularly worried about having no children. Without children, he would have no heirs; and all that he had worked for would be willed to one of his servants. Therefore, he was thinking that his only chance for immortality was to have children to carry on his name and family business. With his limited understanding, a death with no children to carry on would be the end for him. So Abraham was worried.

We've all heard of people having a mid-life crisis. When they reach middle age, they begin to wonder what they have accomplished in life. Some of us have experienced that, as well. Because Abraham was in his eighties, I guess he was having a late-life crisis. He had done many things. He had gone where God had commanded him. He had a wonderful wife and a thriving business. But what would happen to it all? *If only I had a child to pass all this on to*, he thought.

Then something happened that is very characteristic of the way God acts. In the midst of Abraham's despair, God came to him to comfort him. God spoke to Abraham and said, *Don't worry, Abraham, I will take care of you. You have been faithful to me all these years and I will reward you.* Abraham replied, *Lord, I know you mean well, but what can you do? I am old and I have no children. All that I have will be left to my hired hand, Eliezer.* But God said, *Eliezer will not inherit all this. Your own son will.* Then God took Abraham outside and showed him the stars. And God said, *Your descendants will be as many as the stars.* And Abraham believed him, and God considered him righteous because of his faith.

But God doesn't stop with just taking away our fears. He does that, of course, but our Heavenly Father also provides for our future. And that's what God did with Abraham. After promising Abraham more descendants than he could count, God said, *I will give you this land*. Without thinking, Abraham questioned, *But how can this be?* God replied, *Meet me tomorrow night with a heifer, a lamb, a goat, two birds, and I'll show you how sincere I am*.

Now Abraham may have doubted, but he had enough faith to meet God as he had been commanded. He brought the livestock, prepared them as God had commanded – cut in half and laying them against each other – and he waited. First, vultures began trying to eat the dead animals and Abraham had to chase them away. These were a gift for God; he couldn't let the birds ruin them.

Then the sun began to set. And Abraham began to worry. He was tired, not just tired for the night and wanting sleep. He was old and tired. He was about ready to sleep for good. The sun was not just setting for the day; it was setting on his life. His only hope was God's promises. And where was God, anyway? Had God forgotten or, worse yet, decided not to keep the promise? So, not only were the surroundings getting darker, but so was Abraham's soul.

Finally, when it could get no darker, God appeared. He appeared in the form of a smoking fire pot and flaming torch and passed between the halves of the slaughtered animals. On that night, God sealed the promise to Abraham and made a statement. In today's language, God was saying, *If I break my promises, may I split open like these animals*.

Abraham was an ordinary man with ordinary problems. He was much like us. We, too, worry about our future. What will happen to me? What will become of all I have done? Who will take care of me? What will happen when...*(fill in the blank)*? Like Abraham, many of us have followed God for years, but we still wonder and we still worry. But as with Abraham, God speaks to us and reminds us that he will take care of us. He promises to take away our fears and provide for us beyond our concern. God says, *Just meet me and I'll show you how sincere I am*.

So, we come to meet God. But it's getting late. There is not much time to have children, to have success, to find hope. The sun is setting and it's getting dark. And where is God? Has he abandoned us? Will he leave us here to fight off the vultures until we can do it no longer and they feed on us?

Yes, it is getting dark. But just wait. Hang on like Abraham did. God hasn't let us down before and God will not let us down now. Just when the sun has set and we think it can't get any darker, just when we're tired of fighting off the vultures, God will come. And with the fire of the Holy Spirit, our Lord will show us how serious he can be.

How do I know God is serious about keeping his promise to save us? I know God is serious because of the way he sealed his promise. God sealed the promise to Abraham by passing between the slaughtered animals, symbolically saying, *May I split apart and die like these animals if I break my promise*. God sealed his promise to us by sending his Son to die on a cross for our sins.

This is the same God who, in our gospel text, tells us how he desires to gather us together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings. He is the Son who calls us to himself and gathers us as little children under his outstretched arms. He is the One who hides us in his wounds and extends his death and life over us. There we are safe. There we are forgiven. There we have life. So, if God takes our salvation that seriously, we can, without a doubt, trust his word and know that his promises are true. Thanks be to God. Amen.