

Guarding the Promise
Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

We live in an intensely interconnected world. We can travel from one side to the other in a matter of hours, and functionally communicate instantly. We have an intricately interlinked global economy where something that happens continents away can directly affect prices here almost immediately. The wealthiest among us do their level best to avoid paying their fair share, aided and abetted by a global banking system that allows them to obfuscate their wealth, and their outright purchase of political machinery in our nation. We have the ability to see the suffering in areas of conflict like Ukraine, Gaza, Myanmar or Burma, and Sudan - though often we invoke our privilege not to.

55 days. It has been only 55 days since the current administration came into power. Doesn't it feel like longer than that to you? It feels like the opening sorties of an intense conflict, on a scale we've never seen domestically, at least not for 160 years. It's not even been two months yet, and our country has been essentially reduced in the eyes of our allies to an unreliable, if not outright dangerous, partner. We have indicated our intention to not fulfill our economic treaties, and stated our goals to acquire territory by any means necessary. We have actually managed to make our borders more unsafe, and have are immediate neighbor to the north preparing to defend themselves militarily, if necessary. Our nation was just put on the human rights watchlist because of our rapidly eroding freedoms. And I keep saying our, even though I, and many or even all of you, fundamentally disagree with the choices and direction of this administration because to the rest of the world there isn't as much difference as we would like to think there is. The fact is that a slight majority of the population that voted (though not actually a majority of Americans) voted for our President, for these policies - whether because they wanted to "shake up the system," or just something different than the last four years.

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With Russia still holding territory in at least three sovereign nations, with the conflict in Gaza, with China still claiming that Taiwan is their territory, and making threats about other nations in Southeast Asia, there is as much conflict abroad as at home. And because of our interconnected world, we see each one of them, if we choose to. Yet war does not have to be an ever-present drumbeat in our world and hearts. Conflicts with one another do not have to devolve to violence. Our creator made us for peace. We can find peace, and encourage our leaders to push for peace, using the influence of our country positively, to convince other nations to seek compromise instead of bloodshed as conflict resolution.

In the ancient Near East, at the end of a war between two tribes, when peace was announced they would hold a great feast. The animals slaughtered for this feast would be cut in half, and the losers would be made to walk the bloody path between them. This was meant to invoke a sort of curse on them, that should they then break the peace and start war again, that they would be cut in half like these animals. You literally “cut” a covenant for peace. This is the form we see at play in our reading today.

Humanity has been at odds with God since the beginning of the Biblical story. Humanity violates the instructions given in the garden. They begin to kill other people who are also made in the image of God, and cry out, as Cain does, “I am not my brother’s keeper.” Even after the flood, we seen the story of Noah and his family that conflict has not passed away. And as humans again decide to try and make themselves equal to God, they build a great tower to reach the heavens, which leads God destroying the tower and confusing our languages so we cannot unite against God in such a way. And despite our communication difficulties, we manage just fine in continuing to desecrate the image of God that lives in one another through violence, even today.

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The story of Abram, later to be called Abraham begins immediately after the story of the tower of Babel. Abram is part of a very wealthy family in a safe place. Yet when God calls Abram to a distant land, Abram goes. God promises that Abram shall have many descendants, and land to call his own. And for years Abram has followed. But his nephew, whom he loved like a son, has become demanding and broken away, following his own path and settling in a foreign land where he is rich and powerful. And Abram still has no children.

Let's be careful that we don't make Abram out to be a total victim in this situation here. Abram is rich beyond belief, and the owner of many slaves. He doesn't recognize the full humanity and autonomy of his wife, Sarai, who is also his sister. After this reading, we will see Abram concerned that he will be killed so that Sarai could be taken from him and wed to another, hide their marriage and willingly allow her to be taken as a concubine to a powerful ruler, twice. In the aftermath of the second time of selling his sister-wife into sexual slavery, Abram won't really think twice about using an Egyptian girl as a sex slave in order to produce an heir, both of whom he will subsequently abandon when Sarai finally has a son of her own. Even in our reading today we see that he doesn't really acknowledge the full humanity of everyone around him. Eliezer of Damascus, whom he names as his heir, is his chattel slave, who does not know his own father. There's a youth with no father who needed a father, just like a father needed a son, and yet Abram cannot bring himself to step into that role. Abram's self centeredness is so great that because Eliezer did not come from his own seed, he cannot imagine being a father to him, much less freeing him from slavery. Abram isn't really the most sympathetic guy.

And yet it's hard not to sympathize with his lament when God's presence comes. "God I have done as you said. I came to a foreign land. Yet the land and the descendants you promised

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are not here.” How often have we reduced our relationship to God to something so transactional. “God I have kept the commandments, and I have loved your people, and so where is the reward I should see in my life?” We each have our own problems to lament. Health Issues, Relationship Issues, Money Issues, Mental Health Issues, Addiction Issues, just to name a few. We look at the state of a world which is decidedly not as it is in Heaven, and we say, “But I’m doing my part, giving faithfully, worshipping with all my being, loving expansively.” And the God who intervenes in history over and over on behalf of God’s people doesn’t seem to wanna in our particular instance. And we struggle with the temptation to take a good enough promise. Abram could have settled like Lot did, cozied up to a King, worshipped and donated his excess wealth, that which he could give up without becoming uncomfortable. His life would have been easy. The wealthiest man in any room he was in, he could have taken other wives, princesses even, and sired heirs who might one day rule nations. It would’ve been a good enough version of the promise of God.

Abram does nothing wrong in lamenting here, and when we lament, neither do we. When the people of God struggle with bad things, they cry out to God. Nearly a third of the book of Psalms are Psalms of lament. When Jerusalem was destroyed, and the temple torn down, and the Davidic monarchy ended in Judah, the people shuffled off into forced exile as refugees or left in the ruins to eke out an existence without their center of faith to sustain them we have an entire book of Lamentations which is part of our scripture. Every prophet, every single one, expresses lament for the people of God, for them turning from the promise of God to a good enough promise that is offered by something or someone else. Yet these good enough promises always come with a demand to do something that God has said we must not do. You can be wealthy, if you ignore the suffering of those whom you profit from. You can be holy, if you remember that

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holiness is predicated on you degrading others as less than you. You can have a large kingdom, if you're willing to kill those bearing the very image of the God you claim to serve. The prophets also lament God's willingness or inability to intervene in the suffering that follows the powerful choosing the good enough promises.

Lament in our scripture follows a particular form. It begins by listing the suffering of the person or persons involved. It lays out the terror, the pain, the hunger, the thirst, the struggle, the grief, the awfulness of their situation. Sometimes there is a protestation of innocence or an acknowledgement of guilt. It then lays towards God the accusation of silence or ignorance. God is either not acting or not seeing the suffering. Then it begs God to intervene, to change the situation. And finally, it always ends in doxology, in praise and worship. In the recognition that God is worthy to be praised in and through the suffering just as God was worthy to be praised when things were good.

Abram's lament is brought back to praise as he is brought out to view the splendor of the night sky, and God doubles down on the promise. Not only will Abram have what God is offering, but it shall exceed his imagination. Not just a numerous people, an essentially infinite one. Not just a large portion of land, but such a significant chunk of the world as Abram knew it as to boggle the mind. The territory God proposes would be the largest country in the Middle East saving only Saudi Arabia, which is mostly desert. Abram believes and righteousness, *tzedekkah* or merciful justice, is imputed - either to Abram or to God, because the original text only uses a pronoun. Is Abram's belief enough to make him a righteous man? Despite the terrible deeds that Abram has done and will do? The apostle Paul thought that belief was righteous.

But I think it is Abram imputing to God the *tzedekkah* the just mercy. For after Abram is intent on being the one to walk the path originally. He sacrifices the animals, and spends his time

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driving away the carrion birds who have come to pick at the sacrifice. Those who would feast on what is there and leave behind a “good enough” offering instead. Abram drives them off, wanting the offering to be the totality of what was asked, and planning on walking the cut as the submitted covenant partner, yet when nightfall comes, and the feast should be getting ready to begin God causes Abram to fall into a trance, and it is God who passes between the animals, promising to uphold the covenant on pain of death. It is God’s faithfulness that makes the covenant have staying power not Abram’s inconstant heart. Once again we see that the one who takes the position of the lesser is actually the greater, just as Jesus would say some fifteen hundred years later.

So here we are, living in a society full of good enough promises. Many of us have the privilege to be happy, safe, and still mark our Facebook posts with #blessed, if we are willing to let the carrion birds come and peck away the promises of God. If we just close our eyes to the real fear that our Latino siblings face daily, that at any moment a Black Van could pull up and arrest them, just because of how they look, and the language they speak. If we just close our eyes to the suffering of our siblings in those conflicts around the world where instead of using our influence to achieve a just peace, our foreign policy for the last 55 days seems to be to let the powerful dominate the weak, unless we get something out of the deal. If we accept that “good enough” promise that is on offer from the wealthy and powerful and keep quiet on the wrongs we see in our society and our world. Good enough might work for appliances, but it does not for the promises of God. Good enough might work for a car, but God’s faithfulness is not a good enough faithfulness. Good enough might work for a business deal, but our relationship with God is a covenant relationship.

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Fortunately, it is not based on our righteousness - for like Abram, beloved by God, we are flawed, and broken people, who sometimes do things which hurt others, or fail to see their full humanity. Instead the covenant is based on God's *tzedekkah*, on God's just mercy to us. Like Abram, who returned to God even when struggling and after making the wrong turns, like David who repented of sin and was forgiven, like Peter who denied Jesus three times and professed his love to the risen Lord, like Paul who persecuted the church before his *metanoia*, his total turning which lead him to preach the Gospel, we can come back to the promise of God. We are promised to live among the children of God, who are all around us, in peace, which we would have if we would agree that's who all our neighbors near and far were. We are promised to never be separated from the love of God, not by peace or war, not by health or illness, not by life or death, nor anything in all creation. We are promised to be able to live in the Heavenly Realm, not almost good but truly Good - just mercy abounding with steadfast love. We are promised to be allowed to become the people God created us to be, loving, kind, empowered, able, and diverse in appearance, thought, national origin and language. We only have to step into that role. We have only to claim that inheritance, through living out that same just mercy. We must listen to those who say in truth, "We are in danger." We must stand in solidarity with the terrified, with the oppressed, with our Latino siblings, with our Trans siblings, with our siblings in the Ukraine, and Gaza, and Sudan. Living into God's covenant means loving as God loves - deeply, and indiscriminately, even with those who would array themselves against us. So let us drive off the carrion birds of the "good enough" promises, and live into that covenant instead.