

God's Promise

Second Sunday in Lent

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

¹ 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." ² But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" ³ And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." ⁴ But 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." ⁵ He 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." ⁶ And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

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

¹² As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him....

¹⁷ When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. ¹⁸ On 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."

Let me tell you about a letter I received last week....it said I have an opportunity to receive \$7,000 for life! The world makes all kinds of promises, but God's promises are real!

In our scripture the biblical picture of God and Abram's relationship is fairly straightforward. God speaks; Abram listens. God promises; Abram believes. God commands; Abram obeys. There comes a point, however, when Abram finally says, "Wait a minute. I have a question."

We might breathe a sigh of relief at this revelation. Abram, the great model of faithfulness, was also a person who wanted to know how God was going to fulfill God's

promises. Abram looked at his life and said, "It is unclear to me, God, how you are going to work things out. There are some pretty big obstacles in the way. I'd like to have just a little more information."

Abram left his country and his father's house in response to God's command, "Go," and God's promise of blessing and prosperity. Abram went without asking any questions. Pushed out of the Negeb by famine, Abram went down to Egypt. He prospered there and left Egypt rich in cattle, silver, and gold. Abram journeyed back to Bethel and gave Lot first choice of land to settle. Again God commanded and promised, telling Abram, "Walk through the land and I will give it to you." Abram responded obediently. Later, Abram rescued Lot, who had become a prisoner of war, and returning from victory, Abram gave Melchizedek, king of Salem and priest of God Most High, a tithe of all the men and goods he had captured. Melchizedek declared, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth" (Gen. 14:19). Abram seems bold, courageous, obedient, humble, and faithful in all he does.

Abram has questions too. After these things, God reiterates the wonderful promise: "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great" (Gen. 15:1).

This time Abram did not respond with silent obedience. This time Abram said, "I have a question. How can this be, since I do not have a child?" In spite of everything up to this point—plenty of possessions and wealth, new land to settle in, and victory over his family's enemies—Abram said, "I am not absolutely sure. I still have questions." As Abram's questions started to surface, they also started to sound like complaints. "Are you going to give me what I really want, God? Is a slave going to be my heir? I want a legitimate son." Can a person who questions and complains also be a model of faith?

What is the character of faithfulness? So often when people face perplexing questions—when they feel the anxiety of doubt and uncertainty, when they struggle with frustration and disappointment—they think of it as a crisis of faith. We are tempted to think of faith only as unquestioning acceptance or silent submission, but as we follow

Abram on his journey of faith, he clearly came to the point where he challenged and questioned God's claims. This kind of struggling with God can also be a part of faith.

In response to Abram's questions and complaints, God took him outside for an astronomy lesson. God said, "Look at all those stars. When you get done counting them, you will know how many descendants I will give you."

Then the text says, Abram "believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness" (v. 6). Abram seems prepared, in spite of lingering questions and contrary evidence, to take the next step forward, in confidence that God's promise would actually determine the course of his life. God declared Abram's willingness to live based on God's promise as "righteous."

What did Abram believe? That he would have a child? That God can be trusted? That there are a lot of stars in the sky? Did Abram completely understand how God would fulfill what God had promised? Did Abram have all the answers to his questions? That seems unlikely. However Abram did believe that God would be faithful and true. Abram believed that the life God promised to give Abram was the course he should try to follow.

Abram believed but still asked questions. Immediately after God's judgment of Abram's faith as righteous, God declared, "I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess" (v. 7). What did Abram say? "How can I be sure?" "How can I know that I am to possess it?" Abram's faithfulness was a questioning faithfulness, a pleading with God for more: more information, more clarity, more courage, more commitment as we stumble along, trying to follow the steps God calls us to on our own journey of faith.

Abram asked how God was going to accomplish what God promised. Abram did not ask God questions that really only covered up his own sense of accomplishment. Abram did not whine and ask, "When am I going to get what I want to be happy? When am I going to be satisfied? What do I have to do to feel content?"

Abram questioned God's activity. His questioning faith took seriously God's presence and power in his life and challenges us to be open to God's work in our lives. Abram questioned God because he deeply believed God could do something about it. Such questions about God can also help us take the next steps of our journey of faith.

This reminds me of my father. When he was 24 years old he was unmarried with no children or land. What he believed was that God had a promise and a plan for his life. When he was 25 years old he married my mother. To that union God gave twelve children, eleven of whom lived to adulthood. By the end of his life he had 28 grandchildren, a house and land. This weekend 3 generations of his descendants gathered to celebrate birthdays.

The season of Lent offers us an opportunity to think about our discipleship in light of how others have lived in response to God's call and command. What are the costs and demands they faced as they walked the way of discipleship? Like Abram, we also have questions that will not be silenced as we try to walk in faithfulness to God. Like Abram we can question God as part of our faithfulness and trust. We also live expectantly that God's promises of life, hope, and future are extended to us in Jesus Christ, who defines faithfulness by the character of his own life and death, and who calls us to take the next step and follow him. **Daniel M. Debevoise**

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