

Planting Seeds of Generosity

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

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The saga of Abraham in the book of Genesis is a long one with many twists and turns. Tonight's story begins before he was known as Abraham, back when he was simply Abram, which means, in the original Hebrew, "exalted ancestor." Our story tonight begins with the words, "After these things," and "these things" refers to a blessing Abram received from the mysterious King Melchizedek of Salem, a blessing declaring God's blessing on Abram, and so tonight's story gives some shape to that blessing. The vision Abram received in tonight's story was not the first time Abram experienced God's presence, but it was one of the most significant.

God had been with the patriarch for a long time, from the time when Abram received the call from the Lord to "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." And in response, Abram built an altar to the Lord. And God was with Abram when Abram was told to "Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land that you see I will give you and to your offspring forever." And again in response, Abram built an altar to the Lord.

Abram's altar building was his way of giving to God. The animal sacrifices he would have made on them were his way of saying "thank you, God." Thanks for making these promises to me, thanks for providing for me, thanks for guiding my steps and showing me the way. In our story today, when Abram receives yet another installment of the promises of God, this time he does not build an altar, but rather does something for which he is remembered far more significantly; the text says, "he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness." This believing and reckoning, or crediting, as in some translations, is remembered by no less a Christian than the Apostle Paul who uses it as the foundation for his claim that the Gentiles too are entitled to a share of God's grace in Jesus Christ. As important as building those altars was for Abram, the act of enduring value was believing. "He believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness."

Now, there are many ways to understand what the word "believe" means, but in the context of this story, and for our worship tonight, its best and most helpful meaning is that of trust. If we substitute the word trust for believe, it renders "Abram trusted the Lord, and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness." Abram trusted that the Lord would deliver on those promises, he made plans based on that trust, he took risks with that trust as backup, he lived his life acting on that trust. He had his moments of doubt, to be sure, but that trust was enough to carry him to the top of Mount Moriah with his son Isaac, the child of the

promise, to sacrifice the child simply because God asked him to do so. The idea of child sacrifice sounds rather barbaric to our modern ears, and if you ever hear God asking you to do such a thing, run quickly in the other direction, but even for his time and culture, in which child sacrifice was not the absolute horror *we* believe it to be, Abram's willingness to such a thing was still an enormous act of the trust that had been reckoned to him as righteousness. You see, the sacrifice of Isaac, would have meant, of course, the breaking of God's promise and the metaphorical darkening of all those stars Abram was told to behold. And still, Abram trusted God and climbed that mountain. For those of you who may not remember the conclusion to that story, see Genesis chapter 22.

The deeds of Abraham are remembered in the book of Hebrews and extolled as examples of faith. The words -- belief, trust, and faith -- are often used synonymously, because they all speak to the kind of dependance on someone, or something, or some God that leads us to do and say things we wouldn't do or say with just anyone. Trust is at the heart of relationships, at the heart of intimacy, at the heart of vulnerability. None of those things are truly possible without some level of trust and the more the better. Abraham was able to leave everything and set out for an unknown destination, and have confidence that he would not go without an heir, and then be willing to sacrifice that long awaited heir because his relationship with God was deeply rooted in the kind of trust that frees us to do such daring things.

One of the things that strikes me about this passage, and Abram's trust, is that great rhetorical question about the stars. "Look toward heaven," Abram is told, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." If you are able to count them. Long before a certain US President began pointing out "A Thousand Points of Light," God had in mind not just an heir for Abram's to carry his name and legacy into the next generation, but a numberless multitude of descendants, of which we today, in this room, are numbered, if not geneologically, then at least spiritually. I am pretty sure that Abram was really mostly concerned about to whom he would leave his sheep and goats and cattle, and who would provide for him in his old age, and who would make sure his name was not completely lost in the mists of time. He may have felt a little self-congratulatory with the thought that his seed would bring such a great harvest, but probably he was just relieved to know that he'd have at least one son and that his wife Sarai would not go through life childless. Like most of us, he was probably just thinking about the daily grind and what a son would do for him. And yet, because he believed God's promise, trusted in God, he planted a seed which did indeed blossom into an abundant harvest, one that still keeps growing.

Now, I'm not talking about that anatomical type of seed, often euphemistically employed about the conception of children, but rather the agricultural type, to use another well-known metaphor. The seed Abram planted was the living of his life believing that God would deliver on God's promises, his

cooperation with God even when it appeared that the promise might not be fulfilled, and the result was an abundant harvest, even if it was not one he would ever live to see. That same metaphor is often employed in ministry, that we are in the business of planting seeds with the hope that they will sprout, grow, and bear spiritual fruit. Most of the time we do not even see those seeds sprout much less bear fruit. From a minister's perspective, we are rarely these days in a church long enough to see if anything we have planted in the way of sermons or relationships or programs or new ideas will take root. But that never stops us from turning the soil and placing those seeds into what we believe to be the fertile soil of the reign of God, and watering and fertilizing them for a time. This is no less true for every Christian who tries faithfully to raise children or grandchildren, who tries to speak to their co-workers about what a relationship with Jesus Christ might mean for them, who signs a petition for the freedom of even one political prisoner, or who ladles a bowl of soup for the indigent at a soup kitchen. Each of these efforts is an act of faith, of trust, that God will help our humble seeds to bear fruit that one day feeds both souls and stomachs. Most of us don't do these things because we anticipate the kind of multitude God showed Abram in his vision, but because we believe God and we believe we have been reckoned as righteous, and we live like we believe that. We believe that God will multiply the seeds we will sow, and thanks be to God that we do not have to be solely responsible for their growth.

As I said, every such act takes a certain level of trust in the God in whom we place our trust, for most of us shy away from activities we feel will be fruitless. This Lent, as we look more deeply at the spiritual discipline of generosity, let me suggest that our generosity and giving too are acts which have a lot to do with the faith and trust we have in our God. You see, it takes a lot of trust to give anything to anyone; it takes a really significant amount of trust to give an amount that is meaningful, which is to say, sacrificial, which, Biblically speaking, is the way we are called to give. Certainly, Abram sacrificed much to answer God's call "to leave your country and go to the land I will show you," as we read in chapter 12, and was prepared to sacrifice even more on Mount Moriah. But that is what faith often leads us to do: to take risks, even with our livelihoods, because we have trust in the one who has called us to do such a thing.

Practically speaking, in our giving to charities for example, we do not want to be betrayed, to find out that our hard earned gifts went for frivolous purposes, to pay for extravagant lunches, or golden parachute retirement packages. When we give, we make ourselves vulnerable to the receiver; we place our trust in them that they will do with the money something that is worthy of the gift, worthy of the effort and labor that went into earning what was given, worthy of the relationship that was trustworthy enough to engender a gift. When we give to the ministry of Christ through the church, we give, typically, believing that God will, in fact, make the church worthy of receiving and using our gifts, and that our act of faith will not

be used wastefully, or worse, detrimentally. And so, when we give through the church, we are not only putting our faith in those who will administer our gifts, but trusting God to help those people do the right thing on our behalf, to help those little seeds to one day bear fruit.

Each of us have expenses, bills to pay, futures to think about. Most of us have people who depend on us, or who need a little help from time to time. Some of us are just scraping by, really not sure if the last little bit we have in the bank is going to last us until something else comes in. Few of us can say we never have to worry about money. And so all of us, except maybe for those lucky few in the last category, all of us think long and hard about parting with what we have worked so hard to earn or save even when we receive something immediate or tangible in return, not to mention something as vague as giving through the church. Mostly we think of our giving for ministry in terms of how much will I have left over, can I afford to give something, what will that do to the rest of my monthly expenses, all honest expressions of trying to be good stewards of what God has entrusted to us. But I'm not sure that's the only way God wants us to think about it. In addition to thinking about what our giving will cost us, perhaps we are called to think about the seeds we will plant with what we give in faith and trust to God.

The Bible is filled with the metaphor of planting seeds and reaping harvests. In those days, the people planted their seed and then trusted in God to provide the rain, and to protect the crop against locusts, and their fields against invaders, and

generally to bless their efforts because their very lives depended on good and regular harvests. I want to suggest that we still need to trust in God to bless the seeds of generosity we plant, not because *our* lives depend on a good and regular harvest, but because the lives of others depend on the ministries that good and regular harvests make possible. We need to trust that even though our gifts might make us have to stretch the rest of our money a little further each month, that God will still provide for us. We need to trust that God will make a multitude out of our humble gifts. We need to trust that God will deliver on the promise of abundant life even when we take the risks that faith calls us to take, and maybe especially because we do so.

I said earlier that the name Abram in Hebrew means, “exalted ancestor.” You might be interested to know that the name Abraham, to which God changed the patriarch’s name, means “ancestor of a multitude.” May our exalted, if humble, gifts be transformed into a multitude of blessings to others, that like the stars God showed Abraham, are too numerous to count. Amen.