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All Saints' Church
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• **Genesis 15: 1-18** •

O Lord, do not rebuke us in Your anger; do not chastise us in Your wrath; but deal with us according to Your loving kindness, as Healer and Physician of our souls. Guide us to the harbor of Your will; enlighten the eyes of our hearts that we may know Your truth. Amen

There is a great tension in Scripture of God loving us and God angry at sin. A tender God, caring and warming our hearts and minds with compassion and a God of righteous indignation. During this Lenten season, the latter seems to be highlighted all the more. From dust we have come and to dust shall we return. It is a time when we remember that we are but dust, smudging our forehead with ashes. We are reminded of our sinfulness and desperation, not to mention all the brokenness outside of us. Injustice, poverty, war, strife. It makes us certain that we cannot trust ourselves or the institutions we've constructed fully, but more so, it makes us ask whether or not we can trust the God who created us. It seems rather nightmarish to not be sure that we can trust God. It's scary.

But I want to offer a word of encouragement in the midst of this season. And so, to do that, we have to talk about fear. The story of Abram in Genesis is perfect for this. It's a family story, filled with anxiety, confusion, frustration and fear.

God has promised a land, a son, in fact, God has promised several sons AND daughters, kids and grandkids, a great nation. "Go from your country to one I will show you" says God. God has promised this aging couple an unthinkable thing...a family of their own. There is new life on the horizon for this couple; they will become an agent of change. God has said that He will bless these people such that they will bless the nations.

But . . . we read that Abram was up in years, and so was his wife, Sarai. At this point in the story, Abram and Sarai have not only traveled to Canaan but have spent time in Egypt, where they narrowly escaped Pharaoh discovering their manipulation. Then there's a quarrel that splits up Abram and his nephew, Lot. All this was back in Genesis 12, 13, and 14 . . . so you can imagine how restless Abram's getting by chapter 15. And if we continue on, we see that Sarai was barren: a blockade to the promise, an obstacle to God's blessing. So, the prospect for this 'blessing' or 'change' is a bit bleak . . . at best. Needless to say, there's a pretty sharp exchange between God and Abram that begins Chapter 15.

First, we read that God comes to Abram, saying: Do not be afraid. What could you give me, God? Abram asks. I have no children...things aren't looking promising. There's no son in sight. Fear. Uncertainty and fear. In this fear, Abram exasperatingly asks: will I continue to go childless? There is no offspring. Could his 'heir' be a slave-boy?

But the Lord insists that Abram will have a child of his own. And not only is this word of comfort spoken. It is shown. God tells him to look up and count the stars, so too your descendents. That is, not only is the script read to Abram, but he participates in it. God's actions accompany God's words – and *this* is what carries the meaning.

God gives him sunny promises, and even though Abram is skeptical at best, somehow the starry sky is enough; he believes. God beams at his belief: a man holy for his

faith, reckoned righteous. But no sooner do we read v6, that we are back again to doubt. "But GOD . . ." says Abram, how could I possess the land? Prove it!

What follows is one of the most strangely beautiful, indeed one of the most important, passages in all of scripture.

God orders Abram to go get some animals and cut them in half: a cow, a goat, a ram, a turtle dove, and a pigeon. Abram places each animal piece across from one another, making a sort of walkway. Be sure, this was somewhat common. This was the way that covenants were sealed, that promises were secured, literally, the covenant was 'cut'. Each party making the promise was to walk through the animal halves, down the aisle of death, and by doing so, each one was saying: "if I do not fulfill this agreement that I have sworn, may this happen to me."

But in Abram's case, what happens? Imagine the scene. He is commanded to slice animals in half. The carcasses reeking; he's even forced to drive away vultures. Presumably, Abram has been there all day, watching the animals rot. After some time, a deep sleep engulfs him. And then . . . a series of unsettling images, not least of which is a smoking pot and a fire torch. Nightmarish.

Well, we might not realize the significance of this, but Abram and any other Jewish person would have: This is God's presence. The same presence that will cause a bush to glow with flames before the eyes of Moses, the same smoky fog that will descend on the tent of meeting, the misty pillar by day and the fiery pillar by night that will lead the Israelites through the wilderness. God's essence, God's glory and character walks the walk of death. First.

The initiative is God's. God is saying that if this covenant isn't fulfilled, I will be split in two. The Lord is putting the divine life on the line. I'd rather die than break the promise, God says. All this while Abram is asleep.

Now, this is obviously strange, but how is it beautiful? Well, because we know that the rest of the story of Israel is the struggle to fulfill their end of the deal . . . and God is saying: I am faithful even when you are not. Trust me, God says, I will fulfill the deal that I made, my promise to you and yours will come true. In the case of Abram, it does. He is blessed with a son...indeed this is the line that Jesus will be born into...this chosen family is given a land...albeit in God's due time, about 400 years later.

So, this communicates to us that God has and will be faithful. God has initiated and completed his promise. He has spoken into fear. It is no small feat that God, here, initiates everything. God speaks first, commands the covenant to be cut and then goes through the split animals. God was not only willing to offer his own life to keep the covenant, but was also willing to pay the price for any covenant failure on the part of Abram and his descendents.

The good news here is that God is present in the brokenness; and it is both what God says and what God does. God promises, by word and act, faithfulness to Abram, to us. This promise works its way out here in this ritual event. The covenant is cut and upheld even in the midst of our transgression. God remains faithful and just to forgive us our sins.

When God forgives our sin, he is not changing his mind about us. Quite the contrary, we are being changed. God is changing our minds about Him. God is calling us to remember

the covenant that was cut long ago, between He and Abram, the one where God took the initiative.

This forgiveness is God's re-creation; it is genesis. It is not being stuck in the mindset that we are dust (we are, in fact) but beyond that, that we are God's beloved creation, that God has loved us such that we can in turn love God and love in God. Indeed, God himself is love, God can do no other.

So it is not that God forgives us because we are sorry. But we are sorry because God forgives us. A lowly and contrite heart, God does not despise. God does not forgive us because of anything within us but only out of His sheer delight in being God.

We know that God is about making and keeping His word, of promising and establishing a people. We know that God will carry out his promises, that he cares for children and brings forth goodness from the harvest. We know that God is faithful. Moreover, we see that we humans, just as Abram, are notoriously fickle, we all have ups and downs. Pivoting from faith to doubt to faith . . . we're all this way. I believe . . . but . . .

Faith is mysterious thing, isn't it? It is a call to live in the midst of and sometimes in spite of frustration or confusion or, in Abram and Sarai's case, old age and barrenness. Faith does not give us simple answers but a disposition. Ultimately, it is to remember the deepest thing about ourselves: that we are deeply loved by God.

Finally, from Genesis 15, we see the seed of what will come. Of God keeping both ends of the covenant. Of God's very presence hovering through the split pieces. Indeed, this is what happens. Abram and Israel fail to keep the covenant...throughout the scriptures they wrestle with sin and idolatry...the root of which is surely fear. And so, as a result of this fear, the deal is broken constantly. But God has been constant in His promise of LOVE to us. That God wanted to bond eternally with a people who would persistently rejected him.

God has done this throughout history...and here the history of Abram and the Israelites not only leads up to Christ, but also foreshadows Him. Christ is in fact unintelligible without this background. In the light of this covenant, Christ comes and bears the brunt of our broken promise. Christ hovered through the aisle of death, to keep God's covenant. The justice that was required in that ancient ritual is satisfied by Christ's incarnation, life, death, and resurrection. Christ proves God's commitment to creation and to humanity. This means that even God's wrath serves the end of doing justice for His creation, a justice that does not destroy but perfects, a justice coupled with an inseparable love.

The strange and backward beauty of the story of Abram is that God enters into the fear and doubt of Abram. That God promises, enacts, re-promises, and fulfills in the midst of our fickleness. This is the dramatic commitment of God, the affirmation of God's faithfulness.

In Lent, we attempt to mirror this dramatic commitment of God. The cross is shrouded, there are silent processions, ashes are placed on our heads; we give things up or take things on. In a sense, we are putting on a show: Lent is the drama of radical self-denial. This doesn't alleviate the pain we experience and see...seeing sin is all the more painful when we see it as God does. And this is terrifying, because God calls us to take a risk: you have to be ready to be destroyed, to let go of that faith you had in yourself. God's love can do terrible things to us.

We come to realize that the scary thing about the love and faithfulness of God is that it's true. We come to see that the beauty of the story is that God is continually changing the hearts and minds of people, to participate in this perfect love, just as God called Abram and Sarai to be a blessing.

We can rest this Lent, for we know that God is in the business of transforming fear to love, of persistently reminding us that we are beloved. And we see this carried out in Abram's story, in the history of Israel, and amazingly, in the person and work of Christ. Our response, in turn, is a living and loving in this radical faithfulness, and that means seeing ourselves as God sees us.

And we rest assured because God's terrifying love moves us to be humble, forgiving, and loving. It moves us from being irritable or resentful to patient, compassionate, and understanding. And we rest assured because He loves us too much not to continually transform our fear and uncertainty to faith and charity.

AMEN