

October 1, 2017

Lesson 5: God's Covenant with Abram

Scripture: Genesis 15: 1-6, 17-21

Context:

Today's lesson starts on a new series with covenant focusing on how God calls people into covenant. While God promised signs of the covenant like rainbow, circumcision, and the spirit-filled heart, God also made covenants with people promising them things as a faithful God. The first of these lessons starts with someone our scripture series has already focused upon: on Abraham, the father of not one faith, but three faiths. To many scholars, this is one of the oldest pieces of scriptures we have on record with its statement of Abrahamic faith.¹ The recording comes after events in which Abram has had to secure the land and is blessed by King Melchizedek of Salem. He proceeds to give a tithe of ten percent to the king, but refuses to keep any when the King tells him to take it for himself.

God comes to Abram in a vision and promises him a reward. Abram questions God; what will he be given as he has no offspring that comes from his wife Sarai. While Abram has apparently had offspring with slaves and probably concubines, he has had none with his wife. In response, the Lord tells him to look at the stars and to count the number as those represent his descendants. He tries to do so and believes God, to which we hear God render him righteous.

The rest of the chapter details Abram offering up a sacrifice to God in exchange for the land given to him. The animals are split open down the middle, symbolizing that two have made a covenant and two are to keep the covenant as they are called to do.² Then Abram has a dream in which God also tells him that his descendants will at one time be slaves and then delivered to the land that God will give them. Thus, we come to the last part which sums up the whole encounter as God Making a covenant with Abram that his descendants will inherit the land that is filled with all the different tribes they will face later one.

Later on, this story was probably an important part of the Israelite oral tradition in which the storytellers would share this story with children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and younger relatives as they looked to the stars. They would talk about "Father Abraham" whom God called and made a covenant to bless for generations after him. Those generations included those who stood there and would include those who would follow them. They would join the great story unfurling before them as children of God.

Application:

Whenever I was a little boy, I remember one of the favorite songs at any VBS, Sunday school hour, corporate worship, or kids camp would include the song, "Father Abraham." If you don't know the song, find a six year old and ask them. At an early age,

¹ Walter Brueggemann, "Genesis," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1982), 42.

² Found in footnote of *The Wesley Study Bible* (NRSV) on exegesis of text.

we learned from the song that we were sons and daughters of Father Abraham and that everyone around us was one too. The lesson was twofold. One was that Abraham modeled a life of faith for us and that his trust in God even in tumultuous times still gives an example to us today. The other lesson is that God created him and that he would be the one to have multiple generations claim him. Sure enough, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all claim Abraham as the founding father of their faith traditions. In all three sacred texts, he is mentioned. Thus, Abraham is truly the father of billions of people today.

This truth though should make an impact on us. As God made a covenant with Abraham, God promised to be with him and give the land to his descendants. It is the land we all look at and the land we all share together.

One of my favorite things to do when I am in the country and in an open field is to stare into the night sky and look at the stars. Have you ever tried to count them? You can't do it. You eventually lose track. Those stars also represent all the people on earth. Whether we like it or not, we are related to those around us. Maybe not in the biological sense such as brother or sister, or first or second cousin, but in the sense that all people are children of God. Whether they are black, white, or a different shade of brown, another person is a child of God. Whether that person votes for this or that party, that person is a child of God. Whether that person is "normal," or not, they are a child of God. As all those people are children of God, that means they are our brothers and sisters.

As we live in a society that seems to enjoy being polarized and having nothing but dualities in place when it comes to people, I think this passage reminds us that God has created all of us to live together. It doesn't mean it will be easy and it doesn't mean we will be the same. But it does mean that when we fight, squabble, or exclude others, we are trying to knock someone to another solar system and say that the sky isn't big enough for us all. We miss the point and try to say that God's covenant only includes those that we think are his descendants.

So as you go about in your daily walk, think about those people you may disagree with or perhaps have judged away for this or that reason. Sing "Father Abraham" to yourself (or maybe aloud) and listen to the words. Look to the stars to the sky in the evening and imagine who else might be trying to count them too. It's not just your neighbor next door who looks like you or shares your pew; it's also the little boy in China, the young mother in Africa, and the older gentleman in Europe. They too are your brother and sister and they too may have the same questions about God and the world. Those people are also children of God.

And if you get a chance, show the stars or take a walk in your neighborhood or around your church with someone younger than you and remind them that this belongs to them. Encourage them to always seek God and to be servants of the kingdom. Tell them the words of Susannah Wesley as she told John Wesley, that they are a part of "an endless line of splendor," to serve Christ and the world. One day they will remember that moment and share it with someone as well.

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