

UNIT TWO: GOD'S REDEMPTIVE WORK WITH ISRAEL

SESSION SIXTH: THE ANCESTORS

Summary of the Sixth Session of the Course

Genesis 15

Genesis, chapter 15 presents two stories crucial to our understanding God's counter-movement in a world corrupted by sin. Working with one family (Abram and Sarai) for the sake of all the earth's families, God begins the project of redemption. Genesis 15:1-6 tells of Abram's vision in the night, and Genesis 15:7-21 of Yahweh's covenant with Abram and his descendants. In the second passage, for the purposes of our study, we read only Genesis 15:7-12, 17-21, skipping the section in verses 13-16 predicting the years of Israel's slavery in Egypt and explaining the delay of the promise because "the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."

Before examining Genesis 15, we reviewed the human situation as presented in Genesis, chapters 1-11: the corruption of God's good creation and the deepening and spreading of sin. We also reviewed the Great Flood story's depiction of God's commitment to maintaining the earth and working with the human race. In Genesis 12:1-9, we saw the start of God's redemptive work. Rather than do anything big or flashy, Yahweh God begins the world's redemption by choosing to work with one childless family, Abram and Sarai.

For the sake of clarity, I told the group I would use the more familiar names of Abraham and Sarah when talking about these first ancestors of Israel. The Bible reports that God changed their names from Abram and Sarai to expand the promise to them – from "Father of a nation" (Abram) to "Father of a Multitude of Nations" (Abraham). Three points matter here. First, God changes people's names in the biblical history to show a change in their lives and identities. When God calls a person, that person's life and nature are changed. In very real ways, the one called becomes a new person. In our sacrament of Baptism, we preserve this connection between naming and newness of life. The question to parents, "What is your child's name?" reflects our belief that this child being baptized will not grow up to become the person he or she would have been without Christ. "The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." (II Corinthians 5:17) Secondly, Yahweh God meets Abraham and Sarah in life, not with demands and consequences (threats), but with promises. The apostle Paul picks up on this distinction to show that justification comes through faith in the promises of God rather than by obedience to the law. Thirdly, the promises of God keep expanding as people respond in faith. God is leading the people toward redemption, and the redemption of one family must be enlarged to include all families. The immediate goals are for Abraham and Sarah to

trust Yahweh and to obey in that trust. The ultimate goal is nothing less than a redeemed world, a new creation.

We discussed what Yahweh God wants from the human beings: *trust and obedience in trust*. It is important for us to see that the obedience God wants comes from trust, not from fear or desire for reward. God's promises to Abraham and Sarah are two: descendants, beginning with the heir they have never been able to have, and a land of their own (the land of Canaan). I suggested a third promise that is implied in the two: a fulfilled purpose for living.

Abraham's Vision in the Night (Genesis 15:1-6)

We read, "After these things, the word of Yahweh came to Abram in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.'" Notice the slight distancing of the vision from the person of God: it is the word of Yahweh (rather than Yahweh) that appears to Abraham. I told the group about a Catholic biblical scholar, Mitchell Dahood, who contends that the Hebrew word translated "shield" probably means "suzerain" or "overlord." Dahood bases his claim on the correlation of the Hebrew word with one found in another Semitic language (Ugaritic, a Canaanite language). At any rate, the translation "suzerain" would make more sense in both stories told in Genesis 15.

Abraham becomes annoyed at the promise of reward. What can Yahweh give him that would matter? He is an old man and has no heir. The ancient Israelites had no concept of resurrection or life after death in any form. To them, the place of the dead (Sheol) was a realm of shadows without substance in which there was no life. The dead could not praise Yahweh, and so were not alive in any sense. Judaism maintained a two-fold definition of life: to be alive, a person has to be able to praise God and do a good deed (*mitzvah*) for another person. The only immortality known to the ancient Israelites came through their descendants who kept their names alive "in the land of the living." So, Abraham sees his whole life as standing on the verge of annihilation and meaninglessness. Nothing he has matters, and nothing he might acquire now matters, either. So, there is nothing Yahweh can give him. Bitterly, Abraham remarks that his only heir will be a slave born in his household, Eliezer of Damascus. For this problem, he blames Yahweh: "You have given me no offspring. . . ."

Yahweh leads the man outside and tells him, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." We all remembered trying to count the stars and failing, which is the point: the stars are beyond count (in normal, non-scientific life). "So shall your descendants be." Yahweh promises Abraham, not just one heir to carry on his name, but countless descendants.

So, what has happened? Objectively speaking, nothing has happened at all. All the man had was a promise, and now he has an even bigger promise, but still no real evidence of its possibility for fulfillment. He's still an old man with an infertile wife, who is now past child-bearing age, anyway. But we read, "And he believed Yahweh, and Yahweh reckoned it (his believing) to him as

righteousness.” Abraham takes a small but huge step forward toward God’s new creation. He trusts God without requiring proof and with no understanding of how the promise can possibly be kept. In this faith, as Paul points out, Abraham becomes the ancestor of all who live by faith.

The promised son, Isaac, is born to Abraham and Sarah. There are, of course, problems along the way and failures of faith. Sarah tries to provide a human fulfillment for the promise by giving Abraham her serving woman Hagar to bear the child “upon her (Sarah’s) knees” – a custom that apparently meant the baby became the child of the mistress upon whose knees it was born. That son was Ishmael, who became the ancestor of the Arabs, but, although Yahweh cared for him and his mother, he was not the son of promise. Abraham and Sarah would have to wait for Yahweh and not try to fulfill the promise themselves by human scheming.

Righteousness is a foreign concept to us, but we have tried to make it fit our perceptions of life and so have corrupted it. The Hebrew word translated righteousness does not mean virtue and has nothing to do with virtue. It refers to fair (right) dealing with another person in terms of the relationship that exists between the parties. So, in a business situation, righteousness may be as simple as one party’s doing the job as well as promised and the other party’s paying promptly and fairly. The more personal and complex the relationship, the greater the requirements for righteousness. Hebrew is a language that speaks of life in relational terms, rather than in our more objective terms. We would like to standardize virtue so it follows rules and means the same thing for all people in all situations; the Israelites would not have understood that concept at all. We like to turn our objective judgments of human behavior into absolutes; they kept life relational. So, for them, righteousness was much more personal – it was the right response to the other person, given the relationship between the two. It’s a question of, “Who are you to me, and who are we to each other?” Then, “What does this situation require of me in relation to you because of who we are to each other?” Those are the questions of righteousness.

For Abraham, the right response to Yahweh God’s making the promise is to trust it, even if the man can see no way it might come true. That trust acknowledges that Yahweh is God and is faithful. If the sin of humanity (Adam) is rejecting Yahweh as our God so we can live as gods to ourselves, then Abraham reverses the sin by trusting Yahweh to be his God and keep the promise, no matter what.

Yahweh Makes a Covenant with Abraham and His Descendants (Genesis 15:7-12,17-21)

The gory ceremony needed some explaining. Why kill animals and split their carcasses? The answer is to make a covenant. Apparently, the idea is that a suzerain (overlord) compels his underling to stand between the split carcasses and declare, “This to me and more also if I betray you or rebel against your lordship over me and fail to keep my promises to you” – or something like that. “This to me and more also,” is a common Israelite form in oath-making. It represents a self-curse, perhaps accompanied by some symbolic action showing what “this” means – such as breaking a stick. When trying to persuade her mother-in-law to let her go with her back to the land of Israel,

Ruth tells Naomi (the mother-in-law), “This to me and more also if even death parts me from you,” meaning (as Ruth has already) said, “Where you die I will die and there will I be buried.”

The strange twist in this biblical covenant making ceremony is that Abraham, the human, the underling, is not the one required to stand between the split carcasses and swear the oath of fidelity. The smoking fire pot and flaming torch, representing the presence of Yahweh, pass between the carcasses, and Yahweh swears to the promise, “To your descendants I give this land. . . .” God makes the self-curse, “This to me and more also” – in effect, “May I be split like these carcasses if I do not keep my word to you.” That God should make such a commitment to human beings is the wonder of this story – and of the Bible.

God’s commitment takes on new depth when we relate it to the passion of God revealed in the Prophets and the New Testament. The prophets show us Yahweh’s anger, grief, longing, and disgust over the people’s unwillingness to respond with trust and obedience in trust. Yahweh God loves Israel and, therefore, becomes vulnerable to the people’s lack of love in return. In the New Testament, God’s passionate love (love that is willing to be vulnerable and to suffer) comes to us in person. So, “This to me and more also” finds its fulfillment in Jesus’ broken body and shed blood on the cross. Even though God was not the one who broke faith, God is the one who suffered the curse, “This to me and more also.” On the night of this session of the course, we were about to enter Holy Week, and so we discussed the connection between the ancient covenant with Abraham and the crucifixion of Jesus.

Briefly, we talked about the near-sacrifice of Isaac, the son of promise born to Abraham and Sarah. Abraham is willing to do as he believes Yahweh requires and sacrifice his son. At the last minute, Yahweh provides a goat caught by its horns in a thicket as a substitute for the boy. At one level, the story served to ban child sacrifice in Israel. It was custom in some parts of the ancient Near East for the firstborn son to be sacrificed to the gods; in Israel, the firstborn son was redeemed by the sacrifice of a sheep or goat or, for a poor family, the sacrifice of a pair of doves or two young pigeons. According to Luke, Jesus’ parents take him to the Temple and offer the required sacrifice of birds, which suggests they were not a family of great means. At another level, the story shows Abraham’s willingness to take faith to its extreme but God’s unwillingness to require such devotion. Yahweh God desires good for humanity, not evil; blessing, not grief.

What God does not require of us, however, became required of God. Our faith and devotion did not have to be pushed to the extreme, but God’s love for us and desire for our redemption did. On the cross, God was pushed to the extreme. Abraham did not have to sacrifice the son he loved, but God did.

The Other Ancestors

I handed out a simple chart (following Genesis 35:22-26) showing the ancestors of Israel, including Jacob (whose name God changes to Israel) and his twelve sons, the ancestors of the twelve

tribes of Israel. We discussed Isaac and Rebekah, Esau and Jacob, Jacob and his uncle Laban's deceitful dealing with each other, Jacob's marriages to Leah and Rachael, and the story of Joseph. In the stories of Jacob, who was a schemer and deceiver, we saw God's willingness to meet people where as they are and work with them to give them a new life. Through the story of Joseph, Genesis shows us how the children of Israel settled in Egypt. Joseph's story is one of treachery and forgiveness, leading us to a recognition, not only of God's gracious guidance of the people's life, but also of the power of real trust in Yahweh to bring good out of evil.

We left the children (descendants) of Israel living in Egypt and exchanging their labor for sustenance during a time of famine. At the beginning of the book of Exodus (1:8), we hear of an ominous turn in their situation: "Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know (acknowledge or regard) Joseph." For a time, God's promises will seem to be on hold, and the children of Israel will sink to the depth of history as slaves.

Suggested Reading for the Next Session

Deuteronomy 26:1-11