

State College Presbyterian Church
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Children of Promise 1
“And he believed the LORD;
and he reckoned it to him as righteousness.”
Genesis 15:6

Genesis 15:1-6
Hebrews 11:1-13

I have just discovered something about the stories in the Old Testament book of Genesis.

The stories are more than a good story. They are a way to teach. They are a form of preaching.

Particularly if they are stories about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob.

They are ways of teaching and preaching to the people of God about the Mission of the people of God.

I discovered this by just reading straight through the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs.

There is a unified purpose in and through all of them.

Abraham and Abimelech at the well, Sarah's laughter, Joseph compromised by Potiphar's wife.

I had never noticed before was that after each confrontation between, say, Abraham, and God, there would be a blessing.

And with each blessing promised to God's people was the expectation that we would then turn around and be a blessing to others.

Blessed, yes.

But most important, blessed to bless others in turn!

Our Scripture lesson today is one small part from the story of Abraham.

It is, I believe, the first story in the Bible which begins to define faith.

Faith, the story says, is accepting the blessing.

Or, to be more precise, accepting the promise of a blessing which you cannot imagine will come true!

As Hebrews 11 puts it: “. . .faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar.”

But now I'm getting ahead of myself.

You remember the larger story of Abraham.

That primal man of faith.

Who heard a call from a God he didn't know.

He knew neither the name nor the ways of that God.

Abraham heard a promise.

The promise was if he followed what he had heard, he would flourish.

So, he did.

Follow.

He left his culture.

His family.

His old ways of thinking.

Believing.

And set out on a promise, that what he was doing would bring life.

Abundant life.

Not just to him.

But to the world.

“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go.” (Hebrews 11)

Do you remember the story of Abraham?

Then you also remember then Sarah his wife.

The story of Abraham and Sarah is a drama.

Sarah was the key to Abraham's abundant life.

And she remained without child.

The drama of Abraham and Sarah was would God keep the promise?

Would Abraham ("as good as dead") and Sarah, both of advanced years, die before God's promise was fulfilled?

The people who first heard this drama never thought it was a story just of long ago.

They knew the story of Abraham and Sarah was elemental.

Abraham and Sarah were every person of faith.

Their story was the story of every faithful person.

The story of Sarah and Abraham is a living metaphor of one part of us.

We are to hear it the same way.

The part we will hear is the oldest most elementary faith of Abraham and Sarah.

Of us all.

Listen one more time to the parts of conversation between Abraham and God.

God promised Abraham, "Fear not I am your shield, you will have a great reward."

Abraham refutes the promise.

No child has come. Sarah remains child less.

I am old.

My only heir is a slave, which is no heir at all.

God responded to Abraham's repudiation and resistance.

God took Abraham outside to look at the stars

So in numbers shall your descendents be, God promised

Abraham accepted the promise.

And God reckoned it to him as righteousness.

It isn't clear.

Is it clear to you why Abraham accepted the promise?

It isn't to me either.

There was nothing in the world to support the claim this promise from God made.

In fact, there was evidence against the promise all around.

The womb of the future remained closed.

There hadn't been any birth of a fertile future.

The present would be like the past.

The future would be like the present which was like the past.

All the same barren line.

There was no measurement in this reality to prove that the promise from God was true or alive.

I don't know exactly how many of you could fill out how Abraham felt in his argument with God.

I didn't know exactly how many of you can draw parallels in your life to Abraham.

I do know there are a lot of you who could.

A lot of you could narrate how you had heard a (what?) stirring.

Didn't know where it came from.

Was it from God ?

Or from the other side?

if it was a call?

If not a call, then a push? A pull?

In that stirring, was a promise and hope.

There was a promise against the barrenness of what life had been.

There was a hope, against the evidence all around, that life could be given abundantly.

I think that the story of Abraham is about those stirrings that call us from one place to another.

That speak of possibilities of life barely imagined.

The stirrings that prompted some of us to enter our vocations in the work world.

All the calls that turned us from one direction to another are part of this story.

The Abraham within response to those stirrings.

Year after year he responds.

Despite the evidence all around that nothing has changed.

And Abraham protests, "Nothing has changed, whoever you are that stirred me to hope. I've seen no new life, whoever you are who promised it."

You can see why this story is given to us?

it's about the Abraham in us.

So the original protesting Abraham was led outside.

"Look toward heaven and number the stars, if you are able to number them. So shall your descendents be."

I find nothing convincing about this assurance.

But Abraham did.

As did Sarah: "By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised." (Hebrews 11 again)

The Abrahams and Sarah's within us would probably understand too.

Those Abrahams and Sarah's looked at the stars and somehow leaped from the present reality into God's future.

Somehow they were able to leave behind.

Somehow they comprehended that the pilgrimage God had them on would not come tired and weary flesh and bones.

Somehow they comprehended that the pilgrimage God had set them on depended not on the old flesh of Sarah nor the old bones of Abraham.

But it depended solely on the disclosing word of God.

All I can give you are "somehows," because we've entered a mystery.

Somehow Abraham and Sarah saw the connection between the promise of God in the stars and the promise in themselves.

It was and is a mystery.

The mystery called faith.

Abraham & Sarah believed the goodness of God in spite of how the world was.

That is the first definition of faith in the Bible: accepting the promise even when you know there is no earthly possibility of its fulfillment.

Accepting the promise solely because you know the promiser.

Because you know God is faithful.

You know God keeps promises – even promises with no earthly possibilities.

Faith.

Abraham and Sarah believed the Lord, and God reckoned it to them as righteousness.

Amen.