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## Eastminster Worship Services

Sunday, September 27, 2009

### Never the Same: When the Word Changes You

#### *God Feels Your Pain*

Genesis 15:1-21

Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh, Senior Pastor

With Abram as our example, we know that God's people are always a people on the move. We are called to "go." "Obeying the voice of God and following Jesus Christ means that we cannot stay put where we are. We have to let go."<sup>1</sup>

God gave two commands to Abram; leave and go! Leave the familiar and go to the land I will show you. Abram did not know the God who commanded him to leave and go. Abram had to let go of the familiar in order to go as God commanded. Abram had to leave the great commercial center of Haran<sup>2</sup> and go to a land unknown. Yet, Abram believed God.

God made a covenant with Abram; a binding promise from God that would be and remain true, regardless of Abram's behavior. The covenant God made with Abram was unilateral; a covenant between a stronger and weaker partner. A unilateral covenant was based on the idea that there was something the stronger could gain from the weaker partner. In Abram's day, the stronger partner in a covenant was usually after water rights, land to graze his herds on or something else that would benefit the stronger. What is God going to get out of the covenant with Abram? God knows the human race. He knows he will be facing heartache, ingratitude, folly, sin and pain. So what does God get? Got gets someone to bless.

The borderlands between belief and unbelief are clear. The division between the two worlds, visible and invisible, is obvious. We see in verses 1-8, the importance of the covenantal promise made to Abram. God made the promise to Abram, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great

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<sup>1</sup>The Rev. Dr. Gregg D. Townsend in his sermon entitled, "Go," 23 October 2005 at First Presbyterian Church of the Covenant in Erie, Pennsylvania.

<sup>2</sup>Ezekiel 27:23

reward.”<sup>3</sup> The reward will not be a prize that is earned. It is given as recognition to those who are faithful and have performed a bold or risky service. Trusting is not the cause of fulfillment. The reward is given to those who trust and who will risk according to what is promised.

Abram’s response to the covenantal promise is heartbreaking. We can feel his pain. Abram protests to God. He wonders what God can give him, given the fact that he and Sarai are childless. Without children there was no one to carry on the family name. Abram’s tragedy was compounded in that God promised him that he would have children.<sup>4</sup> But God’s response to Abram is profound.

“Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.”<sup>5</sup> God reassured Abram. He promised Abram that his heir would come from his own body. The heir that would carry on the promise would not be an adopted slave boy. God told Abram that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. Abram accepted God’s response and believed again on the promise. Abram believed God and He credited it to him as righteousness. Abram demonstrated faith, which overcame his fear. Abram and Sarai were called to live their lives against barrenness. The “reward” calls them to live as creatures of hope.<sup>6</sup> The reward of God is given especially to those who trust and who will risk according to what is promised.

Abram’s faith mattered. It made a difference. Abram’s faith overcame the fear inherent in God’s promise. How? Stuart Briscoe writes, “The object of faith is what really matters, more than anything else. Some people who had strong faith in thin ice never lived to tell the tale but died by faith. Others who had weak faith in thick ice were as safe as if they stood on concrete. The object of faith is what really matters, more than anything else.”

Who is the object of Abram’s faith? It is God; the God who created the heavens and the earth. If you take the time to study what the Bible says about faith, you will come to the undeniable conclusion that faith must have a solid foundation. It must be built upon that foundation. Abram was not called to believe in faith itself. Faith in faith is not faith. The only true foundation for faith is God. God is the

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<sup>3</sup>Genesis 15:1

<sup>4</sup>Genesis 12:2, 7; 13:16

<sup>5</sup>Genesis 15:1

object of faith.

Even knowing that God is the only sure foundation for our faith does not automatically mean that a person will have faith. Abram faced a significant barrier to faith. God had made a promise to Abram that he would become the father of many nations. But Abraham was old and so was his wife. He was a hundred years old when God reaffirmed his promise to him. Sarai was ninety. How could any person have a child that late in life?

The Word states that Abram was strengthened in his faith; that he exalted God because of faith; that Abram expressed his confidence in God because of faith; that Abram was fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. Yet, receiving the land and keeping it in the family would require an heir. The same God who gave the promise is the one who makes it believable. Abram came to believe the promise speaker. He was able to see God not as a hypothesis about the future, but the voice around which his life was organized.

The faith of Abram was a miracle of God. How is faith possible in the life of unfaith? God's promise to Abram changed him. God changed his heart. To be human as God created means to trust God's future and to live assured of that future even in the deathly present. Do you remember the questioning of Peter by Jesus? The situation of Abraham is paralleled to the confession of Peter in Matthew 16:15-17. Abruptly and without explanation of cause, Peter makes this same leap in his confession: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." How did Peter come to such a confession? How did Abram believe God? Jesus told Peter, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven."

We see in verses 9-21, the importance of obedience. What we see is Abram's act of commitment and God's affirmation of that commitment. Abram did as God commanded. The lesson for Abram and all his descendants is that whatever their circumstances, they must have faith in the God. There is salvation in obedience. Faith counts as righteousness. It is the response of believing obedience to the Word of God,

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<sup>6</sup>Hebrews 11:10

not righteous deeds that counts for righteousness. True faith brings about righteous deeds. God's promise will be kept. The promise will be delayed. Abram need not be anxious over the delay. The problem of faith is waiting, even when the delay seems unending.

We live in the borderlands of belief and unbelief. When Abram believed, he did not simply believe in the promise that God had given him. Abram believed God. God must be the clear object of our faith. He must be the foundation for our faith. He must be the basis for our faith. Our faith rests upon the reliability of God, not upon the changing feelings of the human heart.

Human words are unreliable, because humans are unreliable. God's Word, on the other hand, is reliable because God stands behind it. It is his Word. It has authority because He is the ultimate authority in the Universe. Therefore, when we choose to believe God's Word, we are choosing to believe in the God who stands behind His Word. This is what Abram did. Abram believed God. Never the Same: When the Word Changes You.

She was only 12-years-old. An Ethiopian girl's world turned into a nightmare. Seven violent men abducted the pre-teen, intending to force her into marriage. The men held the girl for seven days, beating her repeatedly. Such incidents are common in Ethiopia. The girls are typically beaten into submission and raped. In this particular instance, there was not a human being within earshot to hear the cries of this girl. But her cries were heard. The unlikely heroes were three majestic Ethiopian lions. Famous for their large black manes, these lions are the national symbol of the country. In response to the girl's cries for help, three large lions leapt from the brush and chased her captors away. Perhaps the child thought she had traded one danger for another, but remarkably, her heroes formed a protective perimeter around her. A half-day later, when the police arrived, the guardian lions simply stood up and walked away. Sgt. Wondimu Wedajo said, "They stood guard until we found her, and then they just left her like a gift and went back into the forest." Among the explanations for the lions' unusual behavior, one wildlife expert suggested the girl's whimpering could have sounded like a lion cub. For whatever reason, the predator served as protector. The carnivore became a sentinel. "Everyone thinks this is some kind of miracle," Sgt. Wedajo commented. This 12-year-old girl was helpless, powerless to change her horrific circumstances. Her deliverance had to come from a power greater than, and outside of, herself.<sup>7</sup>

In the same way as that young Ethiopian girl, we are powerless to save ourselves from unbelief and death. Our only hope is in Christ, the Lion of Judah. Because we do not live as people who really believe that God is our shield and reward, we live our lives as reductionists. Reductionists reduce life into parts. Listen carefully. Our Christian tradition tells us there is another world. The gospel betrays rumors

of another world. The Bible speaks of the reality of another world. When a society denies the supernatural it usually ends up elevating the natural to supernatural status.

In God all things are possible. If there is another world out there, shouldn't this one give more evidence of it? Marriages can be restored, people with terminal diseases can be healed and children that are estranged from their parents can be reconciled. The power of low self esteem and jealousy can be diffused. Cities with massive amounts of debt can discover a new economy and find there way to viability. H1N1 does not have to have its way. There are enough resources in the world to take care of all six and a half billion of the earth's inhabitants. No one needs to be homeless. No one needs to be hungry. Depression does not need to control one's life. Envy, a competitive spirit and anger no longer need to occupy a person's attention. Followers of Jesus bring hope and change into the visible world. We bring the invisible into the visible.

Never the Same: When the Word Changes You. The Word asserts that God is the author of life; that sin is deadly, but God has a way out of the predicament; that there is a way for a new beginning; that God's intent for you and me is other than we deserve; that God will accomplish incredible things through you; that God remembers you even when you forget him; that God will wipe away your fear and enable you to go through anything in life with courage.

God's movement toward and promise to Abram is free and unconditional. Abram need only trust. God is the promise maker. Abram is the promise bearer. Until the promise is kept, covenant is the way the promise is practiced. God met Abram in his unfaithfulness; that's the power of the covenant. Through repentance, Abram's faith was credited to him as righteousness.<sup>8</sup> The text of Genesis 15 asks whether Abram can, in fact, trust. And it asks if God can, in fact, be trusted. It is faith which permits Abram to trust and God to be trusted. It is unsure faith that wonders about the delay. God will wipe away your fear and enable you to go through anything in life with courage. Let us pray.

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<sup>7</sup>Anthony Mitchell, "Lions Rescue, Guard Beaten Ethiopian Girl," *Yahoo News*, 21 June 2005.

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1958 N. Webb Road • Wichita, Kansas 67206-3404 • p 316.634.0337 f 316.634.1496 • [www.eastminster.org](http://www.eastminster.org)