

2/6/2021

Sermon Series: The Big Picture

Genesis 15:1-21

Some time later, the Lord spoke to Abram in a vision and said to him, "Do not be afraid, Abram, for I will protect you, and your reward will be great."

2 But Abram replied, "O Sovereign Lord, what good are all your blessings when I don't even have a son? Since you've given me no children, Eliezer of Damascus, a servant in my household, will inherit all my wealth. 3 You have given me no descendants of my own, so one of my servants will be my heir."

4 Then the Lord said to him, "No, your servant will not be your heir, for you will have a son of your own who will be your heir." 5 Then the Lord took Abram outside and said to him, "Look up into the sky and count the stars if you can. That's how many descendants you will have!"

6 And Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord counted him as righteous because of his faith.

7 Then the Lord told him, "I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land as your possession."

8 But Abram replied, "O Sovereign Lord, how can I be sure that I will actually possess it?"

9 The Lord told him, "Bring me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." 10 So Abram presented all these to him and killed them. Then he cut each animal down the middle and laid the halves side by side; he did not, however, cut the birds in half.

11 Some vultures swooped down to eat the carcasses, but Abram chased them away.

12 As the sun was going down, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a terrifying darkness came down over him. 13 Then the Lord said to Abram, "You can be sure that your descendants will be strangers in a foreign land, where they will be oppressed as slaves for 400 years. 14 But I will punish the nation that enslaves them, and in the end they will come away with great wealth. 15 (As for you, you will die in peace and be buried at a ripe old age.) 16 After four generations your descendants will return here to this land, for the sins of the Amorites do not yet warrant their destruction."

17 After the sun went down and darkness fell, Abram saw a smoking firepot and a flaming torch pass between the halves of the carcasses. 18 So the Lord made a covenant with Abram that day and said, "I have given this land to your descendants, all the way from the border of Egypt[a] to the great Euphrates River— 19 the land now occupied by the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, 20 Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, 21 Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites, and Jebusites."

The Big Picture: Covenant

Two weeks ago we covered the first “C” of the Bible – **Creation**, and last week we talked about the second “C” – **Catastrophe**. We remembered that it only takes us three chapters into the Bible for the beauty of creation to be changed dramatically. With the catastrophe of Adam and Eve’s first act of disobedience, the taking and eating fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil – God’s one prohibition – with that, humanity’s relationships with God, with each other, and with ourselves are broken.

And from chapter 3 of Genesis all the way through chapter 11 the story gets worse and worse and worse – the downward spiral of history becomes so overwhelmingly bleak. At one point God grieves the fact that He even created humans at all because as Genesis 6:5 says, “The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.” Remember, humans were created in the image of God – reflecting God’s beauty, authority, creativity, and goodness in the world – but then humanity becomes so devastatingly opposite of those things that the wickedness of humanity had become so great “that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.” Just think about that sentence for a moment – let it sink in. Those little acts of goodness and

kindness and love that keep us going when life seems hard...those weren't even close to existing in this era of human existence that Genesis 3 – 11 describes. And so God's heart was so grieved, that God decided to wipe away his creation, especially humanity, and have a new beginning. But if the realities and power of evil in the world were so massive that God "hit the reset button," how is it that you and I are here today? Noah - God's grace through the family of Noah. And here begins the first covenant of the Bible.

If you know anything about Noah, you know **he built an ark and** brought 2 of every kind of animal onto the ark and also brought his wife and his 3 sons and their wives. Once they were all safe on the boat, floodwaters came and covered the face of the earth. It rained for 40 days and 40 nights. But then, God promised Noah that God would never to take this kind of action on the earth ever again and placed a rainbow in the sky as a symbol of that covenant. Sooner or later the ark came to land on dry ground and there began creation 2.0.

But did you ever wonder why God didn't just wipe out creation and *not* keep Noah and his family alive? God created humanity out of the dust of the earth once before – why didn't he just do it all over again? Have you ever pondered that? Ya know, I don't know if I've ever thought about that

ever before. But as we think about that question, which we'll come back to, let's dive a little more into the third big "C" of our Biblical Narrative –

Covenant.

Does anyone know what a covenant is? We might describe it as an agreement, treaty, pact, promise. We know that Christian marriage is referred to as a covenant. But covenant is a very "churchy" word, right? It's not really used in the secular world. Maybe the words "contract" or "partnership" might be used instead of covenant. But the Biblical idea of Covenant is all those things and so much more. To showcase that fact, let's look at our scripture reading that we read a bit ago about this guy named Abram.

So even after the flood, after the start of Creation 2.0 with Noah and his family, humanity sadly, still continues to grow further and further away from God and the beauty of the image that God gives all human beings. And so, in chapter 12 of Genesis we meet the newest character in our

Let's get a little bit of context and understanding of how Abram comes into the story.

[Play Bible Project Video "The Book of Genesis – Part 2 from start to 1:25]

We go from seeing this “wide-lens” view of all of creation, all of humanity, and again, the Bible helps us zoom in – again to one particular husband and wife – like when we zoomed in from Genesis 1 about how God made *everything* to Genesis 2 to how God made *humanity*, specifically Adam and Eve.

So in chapter 12 when we zoom in, God chooses Abram (who God will later call Abraham) and his wife Sarai (who God will name Sarah) to be *a new kind of humanity*. And God chooses Abraham and Sarah and *blesses* them, like God blessed Adam and Eve. But we get some extra info about Abram - God specifically wants to bless Abraham and his family so *that* they might be a blessing to the world. Blessed to be a blessing. This story of Abraham was and is fundamental to how Jewish people and now we as Christians understand our purpose in the world. “Father Abraham had many sons, many sons had father Abraham, I am one of them and so are you, so let’s all praise the Lord!” Like Abraham and Sarah, and all their descendants who came after, we are blessed (AKA: children of God and forgiven sinners) to be a blessing (AKA: to tell others about God’s love through Jesus and extend the same forgiveness to others that we have been given). Blessed to be a blessing.

But here's the rub...God told Abraham that he would have many descendants - which would be a miracle since he and Sarah were never before able to have children and they were very old. And God told him that God would give him land a certain piece of land, but that seems pretty unrealistic to Abraham because all the other people who lived in the land. All throughout Abraham's life, he waited and waited and didn't see much evidence of these things God had promised him.

And that is where we find ourselves in Abraham's story when we get to our scripture reading from Genesis 15. Abraham consistently needs reminded to trust God and trust God's timing – can anyone here sympathize with Abraham? Yeah, I sure can.

The verses that Brenda/Lori read for us earlier can sound so incredibly strange to us who live in the year 2021 – all about cutting animals in half and laying them out on the ground. What's that all about!?

Well, In the days of Abraham, covenants were made frequently between leaders of tribes or clans. Something like what we would consider to be a treaty between two countries, people would enter into covenants with each other to end war and offer peace, or at least civility toward one another. While today leaders would sign their signature to a treaty to be

legally and ethically bound to offer peace, people in Abraham's day did not use pen and paper – they used the ceremony that is described in today's scripture reading.

God told Abraham to bring Him a young heifer, a young goat, a young ram, a turtledove and a young pigeon. And then, as was the custom in covenant making then, God told Abraham to cut the animals in half and separate the two halves. Now, what would happen next in a covenant making ceremony would be each person who was making the covenant would walk through the divided animals as a symbol. A symbol? A symbol of what? A symbol that said, "May what has happened to these animals happen to me if I break this covenant with you that I am making." Wow...

Now here comes the best part - after Abram kills and displays these animals, the scripture tells us that, "Abram saw a smoking firepot and a flaming torch pass between the halves of the carcasses. So the Lord made a covenant with Abram that day." God made a covenant with Abraham. This smoking firepot and flaming torch – God's presence, made a binding covenant with Abraham. But did you catch the detail that makes this covenant different from other covenants made in that day? Abraham didn't take a turn to pass through the animals – only God did. God covenanted,

He vowed, to take the blame for if this plan with Abraham if (and let's be honest...when) it didn't work out. We all know how dependable we humans can be with God, right? Just take a look at Genesis 3...or just take a look at the world around us...or just take a look at your heart and my heart.

And of course as the story goes, while Abraham is considered to be the father of Israel, of the Jewish people, and a man of great faith who we look up to today, Abraham was not perfect. Abraham messes up big time – I mean BIG TIME throughout his life. Just take a look at Genesis chapters 13 – 25 to find out just how big of a putz Abraham can be. Abraham, while chosen by God and blessed to be a blessing, turns out just to be another human like you and me. He turns out to be a sinner in need of a Savior.

So back to the question I asked earlier – why didn't God just start completely over? Why didn't God just keep creating prototypes of humans until he made some who obeyed him perfectly? Why did he save Noah? Why did he choose Abraham? Well, we'll probably never fully understand, but the word that comes to mind that only begins to describe God's reason is **redemption**.

Our God who created us from the dust of the earth, who breathed life into our mortal bodies, is also the God who never gives up on his creation.

No matter how much we mess up the world around us...no matter how much we push him away...no matter how many times we have to ask for forgiveness...friends, here the Good News – God will *never* give up on us. God will never give up on *you*.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son. Jesus. Jesus came to be our savior. Jesus came to be bring the new covenant. Jesus came to die, splayed out like those animals Abraham killed, but with Jesus it was on a cross, to shed his blood for you and for me – to fulfill the covenant promise that was made with Abraham.

Do you want to enter into this covenant with God? He's waiting for you. Jesus has already walked the painful journey – he knows how painful your journey is. He's already carried his cross – he knows how difficult it is to carry the crosses you bear. His body and blood have already been sacrificed for you. It's our turn now to enter into that covenant with God by receiving – receiving his grace. Receiving his love. Receiving his direction with our lives. Receiving his life. Receiving the gift of his body and his blood in communion. Let's prepare to receive.