

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Step Outside the Tent”
Genesis 15:1-6
September 18, 2016

This school year I’m using the Narrative Lectionary to guide my preaching. Which means that between last Sunday and the end of May, we’re going to be tracing the larger story of the bible... the Meta-Narrative. It also means between now and Christmas, we’re tracing that larger story of the Old Testament.

So, last week we began with the creation and left off with the fall. God creates a beautiful and holy world... but we, humanity, choose to eat from the fruit of, not just goodness, but the knowledge of good and evil.

Megan told me this week that I missed a golden opportunity to use a Star Wars reference in that sermon. Something about the Force and the Dark Side related to choosing the knowledge of evil... I’m not exactly sure how that would have worked, but you’ll have to ask her and Mike to explain it to you.

What I do know is the story we’re following... this story we are all part of... starts off with goodness and blessing, but quickly includes shame and separation and fear... A shadow settles across creation.

Today we’re jumping into Abraham’s story, because his story sets up everything else that follows. The rest of Genesis is about the story of Abraham’s children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren.

And after Genesis, the rest of the Old Testament is the story of his descendants living into and out of the great covenant relationship that God makes with Abraham.

When I was a kid I remember riding in the back seat of my parents’ car, that was often set to some AM station. And if we were in the car at just the right time, we’d hear this voice come on and begin to tell a story, some little known or interesting fact that was forgotten...

but you wouldn’t know who or what he was talking about until near the end... when finally the voice on the radio would drop in the key connecting piece to put it all together.

And Paul Harvey’s voice would always end with, **“And now you know....?????” [the rest of the story.]** That’s right.

Well, this story with Abraham is that key moment that makes it all come together. This is one of those foundational stories that you have to hear and know if you want to understand... “The Rest of the Story,” as Paul Harvey put it. The rest of the Old Testament narrative, and the narrative of the bible, flows out of this story.

But before we get too deep into Abraham, I want to make sure you have sense of how we get here...

and what happens between Genesis 3,
where we left off last week,
and Genesis 15, where we are today.

After Adam and Eve leave the garden, there is the story of their sons, Cain and Abel... and it's pretty easy to see how *evil is infecting God's good creation*.

So, then there's Noah's flood, and God starts a new beginning with Noah's family.

But after them comes the tower of Babel... and once again in Babel we see that same temptation that the serpent put in Eve's ears.

"If you eat of the fruit, you will become like God," the snake tells her.

"If we build this tower, we can reach the heavens, and make our name great."

Both of these are rooted in a fundamental desire in humanity.... a tendency to forget who we are and who we are not...

Both are rooted in an impulse to take over our own lives and to become our own gods,

...to take over our own world.

...to make our life what we want it to be, rather than live surrendered to the One who created us in the first place.

So, the world continues to be a growing mess.

But... a new story begins in Genesis 12. In Gen. 12 Abram meets God for the first time and something all together different begins.

God tells Abram that if he'll leave his family and his home and follow God to an unknown land, Abram will become a great nation. Through him, through his descendants, God will bless the world.

In other words, God takes on a new tactic, and everything shifts in our sacred story. God calls and invites a particular people to become a blessing to all people. ***God plants within Abram the seeds of blessing and goodness for the sake of the world.***

Apparently, God decides that the best way to work healing, life, and goodness back into this Creation is to use particular people...

like Abram and his descendants...

to use particular people... like you and like me.

invited into a journey with God... to a land we cannot see.

And God says, if we'll follow,
God will make us a blessing to the world.

God will plant within us the seeds of blessing and goodness for the sake of the world.

Well, Abram takes God up on this offer. He leaves his home and sets out on a journey to an unknown land. And years go by. And certainly his wealth grows. And his name is recognized by other important persons in the neighboring regions.

Years and years go by...but what doesn't change... is his lack of children.

It's been a long road of disappointment in Abram and Sari's marriage. Month after month goes by and Sari, his wife, shows no signs of being pregnant. Each new cycle begins with another round of heartache for them both.

Years of this go by and eventually they start to give up. It's simply not happening... and they have to come to terms with that.

But this is especially hard for them. It's a real problem because God said back at the start of this adventure that God would make Abram a great nation... but that doesn't seem even possible these days.

As the old seminary professor likes to joke:

Infertility has a way of being hereditary.

If your parents don't have any children, neither will you.

So, Abram's got a real problem at this point. God hasn't kept God's promises. And here Abram is about 75 years old. And Sari is no spring chicken.

So one night.. Abram's sitting there in his tent... candlelight flickering on the canvas roof, and his pen and parchment are rolled out on his makeshift table.

He's 75 years old and it's past time he makes out his will.

He knows he has to, but he's just angry.

"I've got to put someone down as my beneficiary and God didn't come through for us," he's thinking.

"So fine! I'll take care of it myself. Guess I'll put down Eliezer. I've always liked him anyway." He's facing the truth. Just being practical here.

I don't know about you, but I can relate to Abram in this moment. I think we all get to this place where we think:

"I guess I'll just take care of this myself."

I mean, sometimes you just can't wait around on God anymore.
And so you just have to make things happen.

In fact, I'd venture to guess that we live the majority of our lives that way. We want to believe that somehow God is involved in our lives, but it sure doesn't add up a lot of the time.

Not to mention, there is something deep in our psyche that tells us we're going to have to be a **"self-made"** person,
...and take life by the horns
and simply take care of business.
If you want something to happen, you need to make it happen. Or as the old saying goes, ***"God helps those who help themselves."***

Well I hope you know that's not scripture. In fact, it's pretty far from it. Sometimes it's been confused with scriptural wisdom. And maybe because that old saying is a lot easier to trust and live by... than to trust in some idea that God might just be working in the particulars of our lives?

That's hard to trust. It's hard to see. And so we're sitting next to in Abram in the tent, with the candlelight flickering on the walls, the smoke filling the air, just "taking care of business."

Truth be told, I think believing that God might be working in our world is even harder for us than it was for Abram... because we're all children of the enlightenment... of the scientific method and the limits of rationalism.

If we can't see it, measure it, calculate it, or process it with one of our 5 senses, we're taught that it probably doesn't exist.

In fact, part of the education process in our time is to develop critical thinking... which can certainly be helpful when dealing with data and information. We do need to be critical thinkers.

But as Ian Lowe puts it,
**"information isn't knowledge;
knowledge isn't wisdom."**

When it comes to ***wisdom*** different criteria are needed... a different set of senses are needed. But that's hard for us to cultivate, because all that critical thinking we've practiced and have been taught so often becomes deeply rooted cynicism.

It develops in us a critical spirit that is anything but enlightened.

You see the ancients knew something we haven't been taught. They knew that everything around them is sacred. And that God is intimately active in their world...

They believed that God was more than just present. God was somehow, mysteriously involved in the things of their lives... working them together to bring about something...

or invite you into something...
or open you up to seeing your life in a different way.

There's a word the spiritual tradition uses to describe this. It's "synchronicity." Synchronicity is **a word that has to do with things coming together, a kind of sacred timing that is in play.**

One teacher put it this way, **"It's as if the Divine sent out a memo and all the cosmos got it and responded. It's like there's a flow in life and you start perceiving what direction it's moving in and you start working with it rather than against it."**¹

The wise among us have all said, there is a sacred presence at work in our lives. And when you're in deeper communion with God, you can begin to notice that and pay attention to it... and live in the flow, rather than against it.

Now this is not the same as the silliness we often hear from people who like to use a lot of God-talk in a flippant kind of way. I'm sure all of us have a few friends that are known to attribute their parking place to God's divine hand,
or attribute their indigestion as the Holy Spirit
or their speeding ticket as God teaching them a lesson.

I'm not saying God can't be present in those things. But there is an extreme here where the Holy is handled in such a flippant way, that God's presence and God's activity in your life becomes something trite.

That's not what the sacred tradition has taught. That's not what faith looks like. What I'm describing is a third way between the trite and the cynic... the third way that the ancients were familiar with, but we've forgotten.

It's using the eyes of the heart
to pay attention to your life
with a kind of holy wonder... a sacred curiosity about what God might be stirring in you... or inviting you to do... or creating in your life. It's trusting that God may just be working beyond the four walls of the tent that you are living in.

I know, that can be hard to do... especially when all we can see is what is there in our tent... or what isn't there...

There's no baby crying.
Maybe there's no promise fulfilled.

Inside the tent, life often looks like a series of dead ends,
forgotten promises,
and false expectations.

¹ Burt Burleson, Spiritual Direction Group Handbook, Month 6 Session 1.

Inside the tent, all you know is that you are the only person you can really trust to take care of your life.

Abram tried to trust God, but now, late in life, it's all come to nothing. He's got to take care of his own business. So, when God tries to show up and reassure him, while he's sitting there in his tent, Abram... won't have any of it.

“What could you possibly give me, God?” Abram demands.

“Because the one thing you promised... you didn't come through on.”

Abram can't begin to imagine how God could possibly still be involved in his life. Sitting in his tent, he's just being honest and real practical about things. **“It's not going to happen. Maybe none of it ever was.”**

If you're anything like me, you've spent an awful lot of time sitting there in the tent with Abram. But what you and I don't know, what we can't see, in the smoky candlelight, is that there is a mysterious world beyond the four walls of your tent.

There is a galaxy of stars beyond you that you can't begin to comprehend. There is a mysterious beautiful world where God is working beyond the limits of your imagination.

And so, God invites Abram to step outside of the tent he's living in... and to look up into the night sky. And when Abram does, something begins to happen in him. It doesn't make any sense, really... but the beauty and the mystery of the stars and galaxy stretch Abram to see his world differently... to see his life differently.

He begins to wonder if perhaps... *God's promises*
aren't held captive by his human imagination.

Maybe God's promises
aren't limited by our pragmatism.

Staring out at the night sky... Abram begins to see a horizon that extends beyond our limitations... and he trusts. He believes. He knows.

And in that trusting... he moves into a place that the scriptures call righteousness, a place of being in tune with and aligned with God... and God's goodness.

And as he moves to this place of righteousness, the seeds of that sacred goodness and blessing planted within him finally begin to sprout.

I know that it's hard in the everyday living of our life... to see that God might actually still be present... and not only present, but somehow active. I know what it's like to live in the tent and wonder if this tent is all that there is.

But beloved, hear the invitation of God to step out of your tent.
Allow your eyes to be open to the holy wonder and mystery.

The Lord is with you.
Lift up your hearts.
Amen.

Reflection:

*Abram has now permitted God to be not a hypothesis about the future,
but the voice around which his life is organized.*

~ Walter Burggeman

*The gloom of the world is but a shadow. Behind it, yet within our reach is joy. There is
radiance and glory in the darkness could we but see - and to see we have only to look. I
beseech you to look!*

-Fra Giovanni, Christmas Eve, 1513.