

“PROMISES, PROMISES”
Genesis 15:1-12, 17-21; Psalm 27; Luke 13:31-35
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“To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.” Officially, the lectionary reading ends here: with a covenant between God and Abram announcing that the Israelites will have a land to call their own. This is a profound moment of hope for Abram and indeed for the nation of Israel. Yahweh has announced that his descendants will number like the stars and that a land is to be his and by extension, theirs. The words from Genesis 12 that Yahweh used to call Abram: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land Yahweh will show you,” are coming to fruition in this passage. But the doubts and fears that fill Abram still remain as he and Israel stand on the precipice of being something great, just as Yahweh has promised.

In our lesson, Abram boldly questions how it is that from him is to be built a great nation, even when he remains childless. Abram knows that without an heir his very existence will be forgotten at the time of his death. God announces his everlasting presence with Abram by saying, “I am your shield, your reward shall be great.” But still Abram is not so sure and in his questioning of God we see a very human side of Abram. “What will you give me...for I continue childless?” Every time I read this story I expect God to react badly to Abram’s indignation and unbelief: This is the Old Testament right? Shouldn’t we expect God’s wrath upon Abram for even daring to confront God? Even if that is what we expect, what Abram receives is much different. In response to a confrontational Abram, God reacts in a gentle, almost parental fashion, evoking love and compassion as God invites Abram to look upon the visible cosmos and imagine his heirs numbering as many as the stars in the sky. And Abram believes.

Although Abram does, in fact, believe God’s promise that he will have an heir, he is still filled with questions. Thus, once again, he confronts God—this time for clarification—asking about the land: “How am I to know that I will possess it?” Once again we see the human side of Abram as he confronts God; it is a “what have you done for me lately” moment, an “I know what you said, but it seems so far-fetched moment.” Basically Abram is saying, “Prove to me that we will have a land.” And again we see the stereotypes of the angry Old Testament God blown apart. Abram wants a sign and God provides it in a rite that entangles God and Abram together in darkness, smoke, fire, and ritual. But in the end Abram is just a witness; it is God who acts and provides evidence of a promise. An heir and a land will be Abram’s—God has promised it.

The evolution of Abram’s understanding of God’s promise is vital to understanding the history of Israel. Without this moment, the Exodus could not have happened because there would have been too many doubts. Without this moment Abram would never have become Abraham and thus he never would have been recognized as the patriarch of Israel. Without God’s explicit answers to Abram, Canaan would be nothing but a mirage for Israel. And thus, this moment not only defines Abram, it also defines Israel; and, more importantly, as God chooses a loving response to a rather defiant Abram, God, too, is defined as something other than the “Old Testament” brute of legend.

And that is where I would like to leave this passage: with the relationship between God and Abram solidified and God’s compassion and love known by all. But there is something in this passage that won’t let me leave it simply as a text that announces the unique relationship between God and

Abram and the promises of a God who will provide. Earlier I mentioned that our lectionary reading officially ends with verse 18. However, I believe that in order to fully understand what God is promising to Abram, we must also hear verses 19-21 which read: “. . .the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.”

One of the things I stress whenever I am studying the Bible is that it is written as a history of sorts, books that chronicle the existence of a people. The Old Testament, or Hebrew Bible, chronicles the evolution of the Jewish people; and the New Testament, or Christian scriptures, tells the story of Christ and his followers.

There is nothing new here, but what continuously echoes for me is one of the truths about history: That history is written by the winners; and for those who find themselves on the losing side, they are relegated to footnote status, written out of the history books and left out of the lectionary readings—a reality that seemed all the more real when I recognized what was included and excluded in our lectionary readings.

One of the readings I encountered during seminary profoundly changed how I understand the politics of the ownership of land in the Bible. Written by Robert Allen Warrior, the reading is entitled “A Native American Perspective: Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians.” In this article Warrior argues that while the story of the Exodus and the establishment of ancient Israel as promised first to Abram are often read as an example of God’s liberation, that this perspective ignores the fact that native American peoples are more likely to identify with the Canaanites, or the Kenites, or the Kadmonites, or the Hittites. Warrior argues that as Yahweh promises liberation to Israel and as Israel “dreams of a place of safety away from their oppressors” (279), that Yahweh “the deliverer” becomes Yahweh “the conqueror” and that, by extension, the Israelites move from being a subjugated people to being a force of oppression. For Native American folks then, for those who have found themselves moved from their land through multiple series of governmental deceptions and lies, for those of us who live on or surrounded by lands that have historical significance for displaced native peoples, the story of Abram and the eventual Exodus of Israel to the promised-land can sadly be seen as a precursor of the genocide and deception that has happened to the native populations of North America. At the same moment we celebrate the covenant made between Yahweh and Abram via the promised land and lineage, we must also recognize that this most ancient and fundamental story of our faith also places a heavy burden of responsibility upon our shoulders. We must come to grips with the fact that the promised land of our ancestors was called “home” by someone else, and that the only reason it became ours was because the ancestors of our faith and, by extension, our God, participated in conquering the people who once lived in the promised land. We must also understand that this pattern has repeated itself across the globe throughout time and that our own nation, under the guise of Manifest Destiny, through the fear-mongering of the domino theory, and even in the search for weapons of mass destruction, has all too often used a promised-land /conqueror mentality as a tool of destruction and oppression. As people of faith, as faithful descendants of Abram, as those who proclaim the love of God and the peace of Christ, we must not forget that in our liberation there is also conquest, that in our Exodus there are people enslaved, that in our deliverance there are people victimized.

What then are we to do with the baggage of our faith tradition? Honestly, I don’t know. I don’t want to make it seem that at the heart of our tradition there is malice. I simply do not think it is so; but I do think we need to recognize the breadth of all stories and better recognize that “our story is not the whole story.” We need desperately to read with open eyes so that the people who are barely

in our pictures, in our stories, in our histories, might be included and remembered rather than left voiceless or left out of the story altogether. In this pluralistic society, as faithful people, we must do a better job of recognizing when our power under the label of Christianity (in numbers, in tradition, in \$\$, in votes, or in accommodations) has begun to oppress others. Finally, we must not forget who we follow or how we are called to live which, ultimately, I think, brings us to Christ's table where we can begin the process of reconciliation.

It is there (or here) that we meet Christ, the one we proclaim to "come in the name of the Lord." Christ calls us to be reconcilers in our world—a role that is not easy but is profoundly important. In eating the bread and drinking from the cup we are set free from that which binds us: our prejudices, our egos, our collective history, our woundedness, our fears, and even our role as the conqueror. And in the place of prejudice and wounds, of fear and triumphalism, the bread and the wine instead fill us with possibility and promise, of new life and new capability. The bread and the cup give us spiritual sustenance so that we can re-imagine our role no longer as conquerors but, instead, as those who seek justice and mercy and proclaim that there is not just one nation that is deserving, but every nation, every people, in every place.

God's promises have long been kept. It is now up to us to make sure the promises of our faith provide liberation and hope. God's work is calling us.

Thanks be to God, Amen.