

“An Empowered Promise” ©

Lent 2C -- Rev. Seth D. Jones

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Philippians 3:18-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

Congregationalism is defined in part by how it creates a committed body of believers. Anyone can be a member of a modern Congregational church by willingly accepting the covenant which binds a church together. At its simplest level, a church is gathered together because the covenants we make with one another reflect the covenants God has made with us. We are bound to one another and to God through covenants. A covenant are the words which bind a person to a promise made with others.

Covenant agreements have power when the parties involved trust that the other person will fulfill their part of the promise. What makes a promise and a covenant reliable is when it is fulfilled by both parties and when it is honored in good faith. A community bound by a promise and covenant is a powerful community because the participants are relying on their trust that others will also fulfill their part of the promise. If the other participants fulfill their part of the promise, trust increases. The community becomes reliable. This is true with individuals as well, and also with whole countries. A treaty signed is only as reliable and trustworthy as the willingness of either side to keep their part of the promises in effect.

I am sure all of you have examples of promises and agreements which have been broken and fallen apart. When promises between individuals come apart or break, it often leaves hurt feelings, betrayal and mistrust strewn across the space between people. The sense of failure and irretrievable personal honor when *you* are the one that has failed to uphold a promise made is a hard and heavy burden to carry. When the break happens between you and an organization, such as, say, the failure of a large financial institution to negotiate terms of a contract, say a mortgage, or when a government body makes promises and then doesn't fulfill them, we lose trust in the institution itself. Sometimes, this can be very extreme. When our trust that a dollar no longer equals a dollar, or the inequalities make our work and our money meaningless, great societal problems will arise. When the people lose confidence and trust in their national institutions, it is extremely difficult to navigate such a situation into a peaceful resolution. Promises, covenants, treaties and agreements are both spoken and unspoken on personal and institutional levels. The more clarity we can bring to those promises and agreements, the better for all involved.

Think, then, for a moment about promises you have made, covenants you have bound yourself to. Are they trustworthy? Are the people reliable? Are you trustworthy and reliable?

If we are honest, we would answer that we and the parties we are covenanted with are sometimes trustworthy and sometimes not.

In the Old Testament, the phrase for making a promise is “*cutting a covenant*”. The reason for this is because the individuals involved in making an important promise to one another would often do it by taking one of their best livestock, cutting it up and laying the parts on the ground, creating an aisle. Then, the two individuals would stand at opposite ends and walk towards one another, pass and go to the opposite end, standing where the other just recently stood. The agreement stated in the act is that if I do not fulfill my side of the covenant, may I be cut apart like this animal we just walked between. When was the last time you made a ‘life and death’ promise?

When we meet up with Abraham in Genesis 15, we are quite a few years down the road from God's original promise to him in Genesis 12. There, God told Abraham,

*"I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you (Gen 12:2)...To your offspring, I will give this land (12:7)".*

Abraham traveled here and there, over and about. He became wealthy beyond all imagining. By the time God shows up again in Genesis 15, Abraham still has no heir. God says to Abraham,

*"Do not be afraid. I am your shield; your reward will be very great" (15:1).*

Abraham has been waiting a long time for God to fulfill the promise made, lo, those many years ago. It still has not happened. He tells God,

*"Great! But what will you give me? I am old and childless, so my slave Eliezer of Damascus will be my heir" (15:2).*

In other words, Abraham says,

*"Yeah, you said that to me a while ago and here we are, God. Anyway, I made other plans for my inheritance, so, you know, thanks and all."*

But God tells him this will not be the case. As proof of what the future will look like, look only to the stars and try to count them.

*"So shall your descendants be",* God tells him. *"And beyond that, the land I told you about is still yours as well" (15:7).*

Abraham has been operating a long time on vague, unfulfilled promises from God. He wants to know that God is not just pulling him along in some scheme. The question of whether or not God *can* fulfill the promises God has made is a perpetual one. Elijah will have to deal with this when he has his run-in with Jezebel and confronts the prophets of Ba'al on the mountain.

It is really a question of trust. Do we trust the other interested party to fulfill their part of the covenant?

But let's stop right here for a moment. When we are talking about covenants with God, it is important to make a remarkable distinction. When you and I enter into a promise with one another, we both initiate the promise. Together, we set the terms of what we are promising and together, we make the promise and seal the deal, *"cut the covenant"*, as they used to say. Then we go our separate ways and do whatever we need to do to fulfill our end of the agreement. In today's day and age, most of our promises and agreements involve the exchange of money for work accomplished. Not so very long ago, there were deeper promises made. People died younger, so promises to care for another's family in the event of death were common. Promises and covenants regarding service were made in debt situations. Dowries for daughters were essentially familial covenants. Two parties were involved in the promise-making.

Since we are speaking about power during Lent, in case you forgot, promises and covenants are a way of equalizing power differences in relationships. They can also be ways of taking advantage of power differences as well. The movie *"It's a Wonderful Life"* could be seen as an examination of what happens when those power

differentials are taken advantage of with no one present to bear the other side of an agreement. When George Bailey, who seeks to engender trust and commitment with the promises and covenants he makes through the Bailey Savings and Loan, disappears from the scene, the evil Mr. Potter is able to step in and make a mockery of promises and covenants with the people. With George, respect, dignity and equality was maintained through the promises and covenants he made. With Mr. Potter, all those values were trampled upon.

When God is making the promise and “cutting the covenant”, however, the power difference will never be overcome by any of us. God knows that. But in making the promise, in asking mere humans to participate in the promise, God steps down to our level and binds God’s self to us, on our level. And in Christ, God seals the covenant as an equal. God knows something else as well when making covenants with human beings. God knows we will never be able to fulfill our end of the deal. Some of us will try to usurp the power of God’s promise and use it for our own gain. Some of us will wriggle out of any responsibility we might have had to God’s promises to us. Some of us will believe ourselves so accomplished in our righteousness and spiritual excellence that we will lord it over others as more accomplished in our promise-keeping. The truth is, however, that all of us will fail spectacularly in keeping the promises God has made with us.

Look at the promise, the covenant here, however. God is the one who makes the initial promise. God is the one who sets the terms. God is the one who fulfills the agreement. Abraham is a passive observer and receiver. In fact, God puts Abraham to sleep and Abraham descends into a deep and terrifying darkness (15:12). I am not sure what this darkness is, but right now, I am thinking of it as the bottomless pit of inability, the powerlessness of unfulfilled promises, the incapable burden of being like God. Some of you may know the feeling of having to go to someone and tell them you will be unable to fulfill your end of a promise you have made. Some of you may know that feeling and have made the decision to simply never deal with that person again, since facing them means facing the deep and terrifying darkness of inability, unfulfilled promises and your smallness in the face of greater circumstance and personal failure.

In that darkness, we lose trust. Belief suffers. Way back in verse 15:6, though, Abraham believes and God counts his belief as righteousness. In other words, belief alone makes us righteous before God. But what do we believe? Through everything, in all the Scripture that we read, in all the sermons that you hear, in all the Bible study you might do, in all the thoughts you may have about God and Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, isn’t it the belief that God will carry through with the covenants God has made? Isn’t it, finally, a resolute *trust* that God will do what God said?

Jesus looks out at “*the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it*” (Lk 13:34) and sees multitudes of people who do not see. Jesus, using Old Testament imagery of God as mother, says he wants to gather up the people of Jerusalem like a mother hen. They are unwilling to be gathered up, though. Maybe they have too many questions. Maybe the promises of the past have receded into deep memories, stories told to children, texts written on dusty tomes from too many centuries ago. Maybe years of oppression under brutal empires have eroded confidence, earthly despair becoming heavenly mistrust and betrayal. Nothing for the Pharisees, and perhaps very little for you right now, looks like a new life, looks like the promise of God, like the fulfillment of a promised new life in the Kingdom of God.

When God makes his covenant with Abraham, he seals it by confronting the darkness of mistrust and unbelief with a vision of God restating the covenant he has made, and then God, and God alone, walks between

the sacrificed animals Abraham has provided. The covenant is cut and sealed by God alone. The terms are set by God alone, just as they were with Adam, with Noah, with David, with the Prophets and with us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Abraham believes and he is counted as righteous before God. Abraham trusts in the covenants which God has made by God's own self on our behalf and he stands pure before God. Sure, Abraham has issues after this - he passes his wife off as his sister with the Pharaoh; he watches Sarah laugh at the visitors who announce her pregnancy with Isaac; he has a strange interlude where God asks him to sacrifice the son who is his heir - but throughout, what defines Abraham is the exceptional trust he has in the promises of God. The promise of God empowers him in all that he does. The promise itself has power because it is being fulfilled now, even in Abraham's old age. The blessings of the promise are constantly before Abraham as he looks into his future, and in that future he sees the blessings which come in God's name.

*"You will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord'"* (13:35). Are we willing to see Jesus? Believing like Abraham, trusting like Abraham, is seeing. Saying and believing *"Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord"* is the way we see the promise of God, who is Jesus Christ. In those blessings brought to us through Christ is the fulfillment of the powerful covenants of God with us.

Promises, when you and I make them with one another, are only trustworthy when we uphold our end of the agreement. Covenants and promises made without trust are not reliable. But when trust is present and we seek to fulfill our end of a promise, we become trustworthy. The thing about God's promises to us is that they have already been made by God alone. God's power is at work in those promises. When you or I make a promise, we always do so with an understanding that it may fail. The power of the promises we make with one another are conditional. But the covenants made by God. The promises of God are empowered because they are always trustworthy and reliable.

*"Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is trustworthy"* (Heb 10:23).

Like Abraham, trust in the promise of God, and in trusting, look for Christ in your neighbor, in your community, in those who trouble you, in those who have broken covenants with you, in those you mistrust, for the power of God is always waiting to become a blessing to all of us. *"Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord"*, Jesus says. Believe it to be so, and in trusting, see the blessings of Jesus, and in seeing, be empowered by the promises of God.

Amen.