

09/18/16 - Narrative Lectionary Yr 3 Wk 2

“Reckoned as Descendants of Abram” - Rev Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: Genesis 15:1-6

- Last week, we examined the promise of God to Adam in the Garden. We saw that Adam’s work - to tend to the gardens of our relationships, our relationship to God, and our relationship to the earth - is also our work. The promises of God to Adam are covered, hidden, broken, and fallen when we hide ourselves from God
 - This week, we get this magnificent image of Abram standing alone before the heavens, listening to the words of his God. This story takes place, according to some traditions, 2000 years before Jesus was born. Right at the dawn of some fantastic transition in human understanding, the dawn of the Bronze Age, a wandering Aramean, a nomad of the desert, receives a message from God.
 - In fact, Abram is considered to be the very first monotheist. So today, we bear witness to a revolution in the human imagination and in the Divine relationship.
 - Even though this was long ago, there are some things we can relate to in this story. More than anything, Abram is concerned with a legacy, with creating a name for himself in history. God and Abram are in the habit of speaking with one another by the time we reach them today.
- So turn to page _____. Genesis 15. Right in verse 1, God says, “*Abram, your reward will be very great*”. Abram doubts God because he is an old man and has no heirs to his family name. A reward in the ancient world had virtually no value if it could not be handed down as an inheritance to sons. So Abram essentially tells God any reward he receives is worthless. But God reassures Abram in an interesting way.
 - **First**, he assures Abram on the level of human understanding. Yes, you are right, as things stand now, a slave would inherit your reward, but I am telling you, as your God, that you will have your very own son. Abram only understands inheritance, dynasty, legacies, and family on human terms. In Abram’s world, kings married daughters of kings to maintain alliances. Sons inherited wealth from the father in order to continue the good name of the family through the ages. Wars were fought over claims of dynasty and inheritance. Legacy was understood according to what the father left behind for the family. Families were wholly defined by power, wealth, and lineage through time. God handles that with a single promise.
 - **Second**, though, God changes everything. God calls Abram outside and says, “*Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.*” I am sure there is a moment when Abram is stunned by the vastness of the stars in heaven. Then God says, “*So shall your descendants be.*”
 - God has called Abram out of a human point of view toward family and legacy, and literally calls him to a cosmic worldview towards such ideas.

- And so only 15 chapters into Scripture, into Genesis, we are also called to think differently about what we call family from an earthly perspective and to think instead in terms of a vast, far-reaching spiritual community.
 - The narrator says of Abram "*and he believed the Lord and counted it as righteousness*".
- What does Abram believe from God?
 - On the surface, it is clear this is a story about unrestrained trust in God. This is what defines Abraham throughout history - he is the one who first trusted completely in the Lord his God.
 - Abram is also called by God to believe in God's promise to him, that his descendants will be as numerous in the stars in the heavens.
 - So just by the words on the page, we see that 'righteousness' here, ('justice' as we mentioned a couple weeks ago), means believing in God's promise of a vast spiritual community in whom God has rewarded to the very first true believer.
- When the very first Christians were concerned about how to link themselves to the Israelites and their history, Paul reminded them of Abraham. The first half of the book of Romans is Paul tying the history of those first Christians to the distant past, even then, of Abraham.
 - So if you turn to Romans 8:10 on page _____, you will see Paul talk about righteousness. This is the same righteousness spoken of in our reading in Genesis today. Again, the question is, *what does it mean to believe in God and to have it reckoned to us as righteousness*.
 - Paul, I think, says what God is telling Abram:
 - Your descendants are spiritual descendants, those who believe like you believe, Abram. You are the father of a huge spiritual community.
 - We also are descendants of that righteousness, that vast spiritual community like stars in the heaven.
 - Paul tells us in verse 14:
 - ¹⁴*For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.*
¹⁵*For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!'* ¹⁶*it is that very Spirit bearing witness* with our spirit that we are children of God,* ¹⁷*and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ*
 - When we talk about *believing like Abram*, we are talking about a constant engagement and revolution of our imagination. God calls Abram to a cosmic view of family, dynasty, legacy, inheritance. This is what we also are called to as well.

- Believing like Abram means reclaiming the Divine Imagination God calls us to see the world with.
 - And so God calls Abram to reimagine legacy, dynasty, family, the future.
- So we, by our inheritance from our spiritual father, Abraham, participate in a vast, diverse spiritual community throughout history.
- If you follow polls and look for articles about the state of Christianity in the West today, it sounds grim. The church, they say, is dying. Of course, the more correct way to say that is that the Anglo-Saxon, European race-based power structure that has defined Christendom in America and the West is deconstructing and dissolving.
 - The reality is that Christianity is the fastest growing religion in the world. But the places Christianity is growing, and the ways Christianity is changing as a result, do not look like us. The church of the future is not the church of empires and wealth and control over other people. The church of the future is not a church made up of a bunch of white skinned, middle class men.
 - The changing church, the future church, the non-Western, non-Northern hemisphere church, is still OUR church. Those new ways of worshiping, those new ideas that come from strange lands, are part of the spiritual community we have inherited and have been adopted into by Abraham and by Jesus.
 - To speak of the Western church as ‘dying’ is really to deliberately dim our sense of that vast, spiritual community we choose to participate in every Sunday. The number of stars becomes quantifiable in that dim worldview. They appear to number fewer and fewer. All we see is a pervasive low glow blinking stars out across the universe.
- Did you know that more than 1/3 of the world’s population cannot see the Milky Way at night? In 1994, after the Northridge earthquake in California shut down the power supply to LA, people called the police all night long because they thought there was something wrong with the sky. It seemed like a cloud stretched across the top of the sky and covered the world.
 - It sounds apocalyptic and like a story out of some dark and superstitious time, but people were seeing the Milky Way for the very first time, and its vastness terrified them.
 - There is so much light in the world we have dimmed our ability to see the vast chamber of heaven that stands above us. In Europe and America, over 80% of the people cannot see the Milky Way. In Singapore, the light pollution is so bad that it has affected the ability of people to see in the dark. At night, it is like dawn just before the sun comes up and the eyes of residents can no longer adjust to darkness.
 - As much as pollution in our air and water, in our environment as noise, light pollution is one of the very real problems we have created as earth dwellers.

- When we lived in the mountains in Montana, we would go out when the moon wasn't shining and look at the vast reach of stars above us. The Milky Way would stretch out, reminding us that we are very, very, very small, that within that arm of our galaxy that we can see from our little place on our outer arm of the galaxy, billions of stars are being formed, shining for billions of years, colliding into each other, collapsing and swallowing other stars, and dying, becoming quasars and brown dwarf stars. It was stunning, constantly mind-blowing and never boring. Humbling in a way that inspires.
- Last week, I spent a night up by Baxter State Park. You can still see the Milky Way from there. You can see it up in Acadia National Park. If you haven't seen it, because it is hard to see here in Rockland from the light pollution around us, you really need to find someplace to see it from.
- I tell you to make time and find someplace to see it, because it is, for us, as followers of Jesus Christ, a spiritual event, a reminder of God's ancient promise to us through Abraham. One of the things it will remind you of is that light pollution is a spiritual problem as much as it is an actual, measurable earthly problem. And perhaps you will begin to see that we, as American Christians, also suffer from a kind of spiritual light pollution as well.
 - We have so brightened our own perception of belief and ways of being faithful that we have dimmed our capacity to see the vast spiritual community of which we are part.
 - We need to find ways to reclaim our spiritual imagination, our cosmic perspective we share with Abraham.
- How then do we do that?
 - I think it requires that we do what Abraham was called to do. It requires that we reimagine what it means to be a part of a spiritual community, what family and descendants and inheritance and legacies all mean to us from the perspective of a Christ-centered worldview.
 - In the same way God redefines family for Abram, so does Jesus. If you turn to John 19, on page _____, and go to verse 25, look at how Jesus does this.
 - *Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.'²⁷Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.*
 - From the perspective of the stars, Abraham's descendants are vast. They are connected by one thing - belief in the God who promises such things.

- From the perspective of the Cross, Jesus' family is vast. They are connected by one thing - the word of Christ from the Cross which redefines and changes everything we hold close and dear to our very lives. Who then is our mother and our father, our brother and our sister, in the family of Christ?
 - Look at the Gospel of Mark, chapter 3, on page _____
 - ³²*A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.'* ³³*And he replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?'* ³⁴*And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers!'* ³⁵*Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'*
- By Christ, we are tied intimately into Abraham's family of descendants all those many years ago. The scale is cosmic, but the experience is tangible, right here with us right now.
 - It's as if, in that cosmic spiritual community, there is no past or future; it's as if people who have gone before us ALSO speak to us from the future, continuing to draw us into that cosmic spiritual community.
 - It is as if Annette, Alvin, Jean, Ivan, Nancy, Syd, Ken, Jean, Evelyn, George, Joan, Christine, Richard, Verna, Wink, Elsie, Phyllis, Bill, Bob, Kate's friend Eloise, my Uncle Michael were present with us now in that vast community.
 - Who is with you in that spiritual community?
 - Remember, Abraham never got to see his promise fulfilled. He died before he could see the multitude of descendants. He only saw the single fulfillment in the birth of Isaac.
 - That is why Abraham is such a figure in our spiritual consciousness. He is the father of faith and he is the highest model of belief and hope. He is the singular example of the very personal move of faith into the vast universe of God's promised community. In that moment of trust and hope and faith, God reckons to Abraham the righteousness of all future believers, and in our belief, we share in the great inheritance, the same righteousness, given to us by the power of the Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ.
 - See, those who have gone before us were recognized by us for their faith and belief, and by their spiritual community were reckoned righteous. We say that they share in the promises of Abraham and of Jesus Christ.
 - They become, as Hebrews 12 says, '*a great cloud of witnesses*'. Look at the verse on page _____.
 - For those of us who believe and who fear for the future of perhaps your family, or the future of your church, or the future of what you will leave behind, those who have gone before us become the stars in heaven when we

literally cannot see the stars anymore, when we spiritually cannot see the promises of God anymore.

- Look up then to the stars with your spiritual father, Abraham, and look at your spiritual family with the eyes of Jesus from the Cross, and join your vast spiritual family.
 - Count them, if you can.
 - Amen