

The Second Sunday in Lent, Year C, 2022
Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18
Rev. Dr. Courtney Allen Crump

Wandering and Wondering—if we walk with God long enough it seems that somewhere along the way we will find ourselves wandering and wondering. That is what Abram and Sarai have been up to when we encounter them in Genesis 15. God tells them, “Go from your country and your family and your people to the land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation, I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.”

From the land of Ur to the land of Canaan they go—holding fast to God’s promises of progeny and land. This isn’t the first time in Genesis that God speaks to Abram, but it is the first time that Abraham responds to God and a back and forth exchange takes place. I mean, the man has questions and who can blame him?

Their conversation begins with Yahweh saying, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield, your reward shall be very great.” And then Abram’s questions begin—*what did you promise me again? How can your promises be true? How on earth could your promise of heirs be true if I do not have any biological descendants.* And then “How am I to know?” Abram asks. Because the facts on the ground of Abram’s life don’t seem to match up with the promises God has made to him. *How am I to understand your promise God? How are Sarai and I to interpret your promise in light of the hard realities of our life?*

Abram and Sarai wander outside, look toward heaven and count the stars. And they wonder how they can make sense of the divine revelation given to them. If life with God eventually leads us to wandering and wondering, then wandering and wondering always leads to questions—Questions, especially the hard questions, are a part of our lives of faith. Our faith does not preclude us from questioning; in fact, faith invites and beckons and compels us to question—and to give full voice to our questions, which is what we see in Genesis 15. Abram’s questions are quite reasonable—how does God’s promise to him make sense in the face of the barrenness he and Sarai were experiencing.

And in response to Abram’s question, God makes a covenant with him. Distinct from a mutual agreement, biblical covenants in which God is a party start off with less mutuality. In biblical covenants God is the initiator. God sets the terms. God makes the promises. God decides how the covenant will be sealed. God acts out the covenant agreement.

In the ancient middle east long before the writing of contracts, they had a custom where covenants were sealed by cutting animals in half and placing the two halves apart from each other and making a path between them. I know, it sounds more than a little strange to our 21st century ears. The two parties making the covenant would then begin walking, from opposite ends of the path, between the animal pieces, passing each other in the middle and ending up where the other person began. When they walked between the pieces they declared that they would be cut in half like the animals if they failed to keep their end of the covenant.

As wild and bloody as that sounds to us, here's what you need to know about the way God makes this covenant with Abram. In the fifteenth chapter of Genesis, God directs Abram to bring the animals and cut them in half to make the path. But God and God alone is the one who passes between the pieces. And God does so in the form of fire. Abram is the passive observer here. But from that point on, Abram is asked to continue to be in relationship with God, bringing along his questions and his doubts, and his hopes in the midst of barrenness.

In so many ways Abram and Sarai's story is our story—the story of a God who reaches out to us. A God who initiates relationship. A God who always makes the first move. And the story of a people who respond, or attempt to respond, faithfully. Two people of faith wondering how to deal with a promise in the face of uncertainty—and how to live as creatures of hope in a situation of hopelessness. *How are we to know?* Doesn't that sound like something most of us have had some experience with, especially as we mark two years of living in the uncertainty and challenge of a pandemic?

Abram asks, "How are we to know?" Mary, the mother of Jesus, asks, "How can this be?" These are some of the great biblical questions that get at the heart of what faith is. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman defines faith as "a certitude that is based not on reason but on a primal awareness that God is God."

God is a God who is the first to shed a tear when heartache and loss shatter our world.
God is a God who refuses to let the worst thing remain the last thing.
God is a God who is faithful to God's promise to love us, to be with us and for us.
God is a God who brings a break between the exhausted present and the buoyant future.
God is a God who loves and claims each of us and will stop at nothing for us to know it and believe it.

So Abram's faith is formed in the crucible of life, where the changes and chances of this life can threaten to undo us. Following his questions, Abram doesn't have a generalized laissez-faire sense of "everything will work out alright eventually." Rather, Abram asks tough questions and comes to a new orientation and understanding of reality based on "a concrete promise from a known promise-maker."

Abram and Sarai live in the distance between what God has promised and their experiences on the ground. And in that space they wander and wonder—and the rest of their narrative explores how faith permits Abram and Sarai to trust and how God can be trusted.

I love the story of Abram and Sarai because they are honest about what doesn't make sense to them. And honestly, I also love their story because I've always struggled with the kind of religiosity that responds to the wanderings and wonderings and wrestlings of faith with statements like these: *God has a plan. God doesn't give you more than you can handle. God is in control. Everything happens for a reason.* And so many others that you could probably add to this list. I've just never found sentiments like these to be helpful or true to my own experience as a child of God. I am convinced that had I not spent most of my life surrounded by a community of faith that invited me to ask questions about God and to God—a community that held the questions while refusing to give simple or pithy answers, and a community that allowed me to wrestle with my questions about life and faith—I would likely not be a person of faith today, and certainly not a pastor.

A few years ago after Hurricane Maria, I was in Puerto Rico with a team rebuilding homes. We met a man named Victor, who had survived the storm, but not without loss. His aunt and her special need daughter died in the storm and its aftermath. And of course, they had property damage. Yet, in the midst of all of that Victor put a sign in his backyard- in big spray painted letters it said, "Dios es Fiel" (God is faithful). Countless people who were themselves wandering and wondering after the disaster, could see it as they made their way down the highway. It was a clear sign of Victor's trust in God and his belief in God's faithfulness even in the midst of loss and devastation. It seemed like such a statement of resistance and truth. Because sometimes that may be the most we can honestly say—God is faithful.

My childhood pastor Chuck Poole says it this way, "People do not get up on Sunday morning, get dressed, get in their cars and come to church so they can be told cheerful sounding things that will not stand up and prove true in life's toughest arenas. So let us be

careful to say that not every story ends happily and not every situation gets fixed. Some people get the miracle they want; the kind of miracle which enables them to escape the worst sorrow. But others only get the miracle they need; the kind of miracle which enables them to endure the worst sorrow. Either way, God can be trusted, trusted to get us around the worst or to see us through the worst. God will provide . . . something. There will be some kind of ram in the bush, some gift from God. God will not abandon or forsake us. Even when God cannot be explained or understood or defended, even then, God can be trusted.”

I think that’s the truth of what Abram and Sarai came to know through their wanderings and wonderings—even when God cannot be explained or understood or defended, even then God can be trusted. Because God is faithful. In our own wanderings and wonderings, when we do not see how the promises of God can be made real in our lives, and when we cannot imagine how we will endure, God can be trusted. Because God is faithful. Amen.

© Courtney Allen Crump, 2022