

Cutting A Deal 9/26/2010

Genesis 15 - After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.' But Abram said, 'O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?' And Abram said, 'You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.' But the word of the LORD came to him, 'This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.' He brought him outside and said, 'Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Then he said to him, 'I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.' But he said, 'O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?' He said to him, 'Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtle-dove, and a young pigeon.' He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire-pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.'

There is a psychological condition that sometimes occurs after making a large purchase. They call it Buyer's Remorse, and it is the state or feeling of apprehension or guilt that might come over a person after a purchase such as a car or a house or a very expensive present. It could be guilt over having spent so much money, it could be anxiety over wondering if you made the right choice in the matter or concern that you were simply caught up in the moment or by the snappy patter of the salesperson. Buyer's Remorse is what puts the nagging questions in the back of your head saying, "Did I just make a mistake?" and whispering all the ways things could go wrong.

When I hear the story of Abram, or Abraham as he is later called, I have to wonder, how much was he feeling Buyer's Remorse during all this? How worried was he at the immensity of the decision he had made?

I mean first, in chapter 12 of Genesis, God says to him, "You will be blessed and your descendants will be numerous, and what I need you to do is pack up and leave." God doesn't tell him where he is supposed to go, only that he needs to leave the only home he has ever known; leave his extended family, his friends and all he knows and go...somewhere.

At the time, Abraham is living in Haran, in what is today part of Turkey. And he travels, 800-900 miles. He goes down into Egypt and out again, and finally, he says to God, "Look! You said my descendants are going to inherit this land and be so numerous? Well right now my only heir is one of my servants. How is this supposed to work?" And God says to him, "Step outside and look up at the stars. See if you can count them. That servant? He's not your heir. Your own kid is going to be your heir, and your descendants are going to be more numerous than the stars themselves!" And Abraham looks at the stars, and once again says "Okay God. I believe." And God says, "Good. Now, to show you how serious I am, let's cut a deal!"

God and Abraham enter into a covenant, originally called cutting a covenant. A covenant was like a contract where both sides pledged their loyalty and what they were agreeing to do, and the way it worked was described in today's reading. They took the animals and cut them in half and dragged the halves to either side. The ones making the covenant would then pass between the halves, walking on the

bloodied ground and they would make their vows, and the symbolism was, if I break my vow, may what has been done to these animals be done to me! There was no more important vow or agreement, and God forms this covenant with Abraham.

So, you would think that after an important step like that, after such an overwhelming show of devotion and commitment, a faithful person like Abraham would leave his questions behind. But that wasn't the case.

Sarah and Abraham get impatient, it has now been almost twenty years since the original agreement, and there is still no child. They are beginning to worry that maybe they misunderstood what it was they were supposed to do, and so, Sarah suggests that Abraham have a child with her servant, Hagar. By the laws of those days, even though they weren't married, a child between Abraham and Hagar would still be considered his child and his heir. Abraham agrees, and they have a child named Ishmael. But this just brings new questions. What if this wasn't what they were supposed to do? What if this wasn't the way God wanted them to go about getting a son?

God and Abraham talk again, and God clears up the question. God clarifies that the child God had been talking about would indeed come from Abraham and Sarah. But Abraham says, "What about Ishmael?" And God says, "Because Ishmael is also your son and a part of you, I am going to extend my blessing to him

as well. Don't worry. I will make you the ancestor of a multitude of nations and Ishmael shall be the father of 12 princes." And sure enough, soon after that, Sarah, despite her and Abraham's age, becomes pregnant, and gives birth to a son, whom they name, Isaac.

Now, Sarah, worried and faced with her own doubts, fears that Ishmael will supplant her son Isaac. You see Ishmael is older and therefore, could claim the inheritance for himself, so she orders Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away. To banish them from the house and send them out into the wilderness to die. Abraham is torn up over this and turns to God with new questions. God says to him, "Don't worry. Don't be afraid. I promised you that I would watch over your children, and I shall. You do what you need to do, for I will make of Ishmael a great nation also." And God sends an angel to lead Hagar and Ishmael through the wilderness to a place where they will be welcomed and will thrive. According to the Quran, Ishmael grows up to be a prophet and goes on to become the ancestor of the Northern Arab people. Which is why Islam, Judaism and Christianity can all tie their roots back to Abraham. Islam through Ishmael, and Judaism and Christianity through Isaac.

This story of Abraham and Sarah, this whole portion of the book of Genesis that we read this week, is an amazing story! The entire story is a mixed bag of Faith and Doubt. I mean, in our reading we heard today, verse 6 says, "And

[Abram] believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness."

Abraham was chosen specifically because he was a man of faith, and yet, for almost every action of strong faith and belief in the Lord, there is an equal story of doubt and questioning. But in the end, each time, his questions lead him to a better understanding of what God wants. God may not have answered every question that Abraham put before him, but each time Abraham questioned, God's commands became a little more clear. Abraham follows his faith and listens to the Lord. It is an amazing story, because we have a man, who by following his faith, goes from being a guy who lives in the middle of nowhere, Turkey, to the patriarch, the forefather of billions of followers; three major religions, Judaism, Islam and Christianity; well over half the people on the planet! A true multitude of nations.

When we read this story, there should be plenty of ways that we can identify with Abraham and Sarah, I mean we all of us have doubts. Doubts are part of the human experience. They cause us to question, in big and small ways, every single day of our lives. Sometimes the questions are about little things like "is the milk in the fridge still good?" or "Will I be too cold today if I wear shorts?" or "Did I make a mistake going from the goatee to the full beard?!"

Others are bigger, life changing questions. I remember how worried I was before I had to teach my first lesson as a youth director or the first time I led a

work trip, or when I began seminary. Or even bigger, when I decided three years ago that it was time to switch churches. Had I made the right decision? Had I thought everything through? Was this going to work out? Was I doing the right thing? Was I sure this was where God was calling me to be?

Others still are more troubling, and these are the questions that raise doubts about our faith and all we believe. Questions like "What do I really believe about God? What do I think happens to us after we pass away? Or How does what I just read reflect on what I believe about God and the world?"

And these kinds of doubts, these questions are some of the ones that may crop up while we are going through the Grand Sweep Bible Study. Pastor Bromleigh shared in her blog post last Thursday of the family that had been going through the readings together, and how shocked they were by the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. The Bible can be a hard book to read sometimes. Especially if it is your first time to really read through it. The Bible in most ways is not edited, it is not censored, it is not sanitized or Politically correct. There is war, lust, violence and hate mixed in with all the stories of peace, love and kindness. There are lots of stories in there that we never talk about, and there are even more where the version we learned in Sunday School may not tell us the whole story. And when we hit stories like that, it can raise all sorts of questions.

Faith is a tricky thing. We often think it should be absolute. We often think that if someone had a strong enough faith, then they wouldn't have questions anymore, they would know all the answers. Somewhere along the line, someone seems to have sold us on the idea, that if we were good Christians, then we would have no fears, no doubts, and would never question the Bible, God, or our Faith! So now we almost feel guilty when we do. I've had people come to me with religious questions who seem embarrassed, like there is something wrong with them because they don't know everything about the Bible.

Well guess what? We are the religious descendants of Abraham and Sarah! We have questions, we have doubts? Well so did they! In fact, I think you would be hard pressed to find anyone in the Bible who never wonders about or questions God. They all did. Including Jesus himself.

I come from a family of teachers, and almost any educator will tell you that asking questions is how we learn. The more we learn about the Bible and about God, the stronger our faith will be. Questions shouldn't be something we shy away from, but something we are proud of and something that we seek to explore.

When I was in seminary, my Judaism and Early Christianity class was taught by the Rabbi Schalman. It was one of my favorite classes partly because there was no books required for the class, no syllabus, no papers or homework. Each day we were to come with a question. He told us the first day of class that if we did not

have a question, then we must not be interested in learning, and we could go home. So each week, we would sit and he would say “Who has a question?” and we would begin.

This is the way the Grand Sweep should be for us. The church should be filled with questions as people do the readings and want to know more!

I want to make a deal, I want to cut a deal with you. As you do the readings, as we move forward, I don't want you to be embarrassed or afraid or self conscious because you have questions. I want you to speak out and ask. You can come in to talk or call the church office and talk to Pastor Ronni or Pastor Bromleigh or myself. You can e-mail me or text me or call my cell phone or look me up on facebook, however you want to reach out to us, do it! We may not be able to answer your question, but we'll try, and maybe, through talking with you, we'll find out the answer together.

And that's why we are doing the Grand Sweep together, as a congregation, so that we can gain answers to our questions and grow in our Faith. Moving forward as a congregation and as Christians and growing closer to one another and to Christ through the word of God.

Amen.