

“Built on a Promise”

Luke 13: 31-35, Genesis 5: 1-12, 17-18

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Lynne M. Dolan

If you turn on the TV early in the morning or can't fall asleep at night, you may see a variety of “alternative” programming. Most of it is paid advertisements for the latest get rich quick scheme or weight loss miracle or face cream that guarantees results in just three days. Many of us fall prey to this “get rich, get thin, look younger without really trying” mentality. We don't want to believe that for most people wealth is accumulated slowly through hard work, a bit of luck and by saving more than you spend on a regular basis. We would rather take a pill or eat cabbage soup or rub a mysterious cream all over our bodies than trust the science and good sense that says the only way to lose weight and get healthy is by eating right and exercising more. These infomercials may be amusing, but we are know that most of what they promise is not true. After all, there is no such thing as a free lunch.

It is hard to be faithful and patient when you don't see any results. It is hard to believe that God is listening when it seems like your prayers go unanswered. This must be how Abram felt in the story we heard this morning. Abram is challenged to trust that the covenant God made with Abram and Sarai is still valid. It has been many years since God called Abram and Sarai to leave their homeland on the assurance that even in their twilight years they would have a child. It is years later and still there is no child. Abram and Sarai even tried using their slave girl Hagar to produce what they thought would be an heir. However, God informs Abram that this child is not the promised heir. The promised child is yet to be born.

Abram is justifiably skeptical. Sarai has been past childbearing years for some time now. We already know that Abram is capable of producing an heir, however, Sarai's ability to have children is what understandably worries Abram. God understands their frustration and disbelief. God even forgives Abram for taking matters into his own hands. God does not chastise nor get angry with Abram. Instead, God comes to Abram in a vision and utters those all too familiar words, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield, your reward shall be very great.”

Abram is confused. He wonders if God is promising a new reward for his faithfulness. In disbelief, Abram challenges God saying that at this rate, his servant is more likely to receive his inheritance than any heir he might eventually have. Still, God does not grow impatient with Abram. Instead, God takes Abram out and tells him to look into night sky. As he looks toward the heavens, it is completely covered with stars. God tells Abram to count the stars if he is able. Then reiterates the promise, “so shall your descendents be,” and the story says, “Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.”

Every so often God speaks directly to someone in the Bible. God speaks here to Abram. There are also a few times when someone has the courage to actually speak back to God. In this case Abram wonders aloud with God how realistic it is for God to describe Abram’s future in such glowing terms. After all it has been many years and the promised child has yet to arrive. God reminds him that God’s word is good. It will come to be, not in his time, but in God’s time. He need only be patient and believe. This is not an easy thing to do. There is always the temptation to short-change the process. Even Abram and Sarai thought they could outsmart God. However, God had a plan and Abram proved how easy it is to misunderstand what God intends. This plan will eventually unfold and with it everything God has promised, as long he does not try to rush things, or take control of the process. Letting go and letting God be in charge is a challenge we all face at one time or another.

Abram and Sarai have already demonstrated their faith by responding to God’s call. God came to Abraham when he was seventy five years old, when everyone he knew was settling into their golden years. God told Abram to leave his country for an unknown land that God would give him. Naturally, Abram was skeptical, however he did as God asked. Most people would call this faith, some might even call it blind faith.

Being without children in that culture was serious business. There was no use for land, no matter how abundant it may be, if you had no heirs who could take possession of it once you were gone. However, this story is not about land or the lack of a legitimate heir to inherit it. Abram’s struggles remind us that faith is something that does not come easily. Real faith is not something you get all at once or lose all at once. Abram and Sarai can certainly attest to that! One writer says in fact, faith is “the continuous, committed response to a promise in the face of real doubts, deep questions

and painful struggles.” Faith is about following your heart, listening for that sometime absent voice of God and having the ability to discern the true source of the voices you hear. Sometimes the voice we hear sounds like God’s and it turns out not to be so. Surprisingly, when we follow the wrong voice, God does not forsake or abandons us. God comes to us and reminds us again that God has been with us, God will always be with us, God has a plan and it may be that the plan God has for us has yet to be fulfilled.

That is what happened with Abram and Sarai. They grew impatient, stopped listening to God, and took matters into their own hands. I imagine Abram knew what he had done was not right. When God speaks in a vision to Abram, God does not punish or belittle him. God simply reminds Abram to trust in God. That what God promises has yet to be. He will have a legitimate heir and this will set into motion the plan that God has had for him all along.

It is easy to focus on what we do not have, the dreams that have not been fulfilled, or the barren places in our lives that threaten to overwhelm us. When the hard times hit we may find ourselves enveloped by darkness, where all we can see is what has not happened, what could have been, or what we want but can never have. Whenever I find myself in that dark place, God takes me by the hand and tells me to look toward the heavens. Each star is a promise, something yet to be, if not for me, perhaps then for those whom I love. God reminds me that as long as I stick with God, God will stick with me. God will be right there, making my path lighter, carrying my heavy load, reminding me that what I experience today is not necessarily what will be tomorrow.

Look to the heavens. There are days when we look and we see nothing but deep, inky darkness. However, if we can have the courage to hang in there, we may see beyond the darkness where God has sprinkled a million sparks of light. Then God will say to us, “be not afraid, I am your shield.” No matter what you face, no matter how vulnerable you feel, no matter what dangers or what losses loom before you, God promises are true, “be not afraid, I am your shield.”

As we journey through this season of Lent, we hear this ancient story of who we are and where we came from. Perhaps this is a good time to reflect on those empty or barren places of our lives and to seek the strength and courage to move toward an attitude of trust. God is doing a new thing, we

hear, and we long for it to be so, in spite of evidence to the contrary: war, disease, young people killed by a deadly tornado, or new threats from terrorism or global warming. Today there seems to be so much fear and so many broken promises. So the words, “Do not fear, I am your shield” feel like a balm that not only heals, but also strengthens us for the work that lies ahead.

God invites us to be like Abram and Sarai, to step out in faith, into a future we cannot imagine, that we believe belongs to God and not to death or destruction, hatred, terrorism or global warming. God affirms that whenever we respond with that kind of trust, there will always be a right relationship between us. This kind of faith is not something we get all at once and it is not something that can be taken away in a moment. This kind of trust is what happens when we enter into a covenant with God. The preacher Timothy Shapiro says, “the perilous connection between God and human beings can only be sustained by a covenant. Like any challenging, yet potentially redemptive relationship, it only works if you work at it.” If we don’t take this relationship seriously, it becomes cheap. He says there is cheap covenant just as there is cheap grace.

Abram learned that promises don’t make things better in the blink of an eye. When we receive the sacrament of baptism we know it is not a magic potion or a mystical force field that will protect us from all evil. It is our promise to be in relationship with a loving God, who will never abandon or forsake us. A covenant is a sacred trust between two partners a relationship to which we bring our very lives in order to make it work. This covenant is a life long commitment that grows deeper and richer each day. There are no short cuts to transformation. It takes time, trust, and commitment. The covenant between God and God’s people is real; there is nothing cheap about it. God will set us straight and bring us back into right relationship whenever we have the courage to believe. Then our lives will shine brightly like a thousand points of light! May it be so! Amen