

"Promises We Can't Keep"

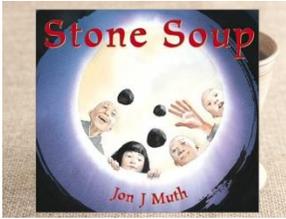
February 25, 2018

Genesis 17: 1-7 and 15-16

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. ² And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous."³ Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, ⁴ "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁵ No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷ I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you... ¹⁵ God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶ I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."



Today we come to the second covenant God established with mankind. Whereas last week's covenant with Noah was a global covenant, this week's covenant with Abraham and Sarah is more personal. Instead of a promise to all of creation, this promise comes to what will become God's chosen people. As we delve into today's message, we will look at how we too can become a part of sharing in and experiencing God's blessings through a holy relationship. Let us pray.



One day, a traveler was passing through a village. Times were hard, and people were not particularly warm or hospitable to strangers, or to each other for that matter. Hardly anyone responded to the traveler's hearty greeting or to his cheery attitude. Unfazed by the lukewarm reception, he sat down in the village square and got busy. He took out a large iron pot, whistling a merry tune as he did so. He proceeded to light a fire. He filled the pot with water. While waiting for the water to boil, he made a big to-do about taking out a knife, a soup ladle, and a small silken bag, whistling all the while. All this activity attracted the attention of a passersby.

"What are you cooking?" asked the curious onlooker. "Stone soup", was the cheerful reply. "Stone soup! I've never heard of such a thing," said another. "Stick around and have some when it's done," was the warm response. A crowd was starting to gather around the traveler, curious about this so-called stone soup. He continued to whistle away as he ceremonially opened the silken bag and dropped a polished stone into the huge pot of water.

Finally, the water started to boil. The traveler took his ladle and took a sip of the soup. "How does it taste?" asked a voice from the crowd. "It tastes good," said the traveler, "but it would taste even better if it had a couple of potatoes," he added wistfully. "I have some potatoes," volunteered an elderly lady. She came forward and handed them over to the traveler. He peeled and chopped them expertly, and added them to the soup. After a while, he took another sip. He declared it the best stone soup ever, but conceded that it would taste even better if it had a few carrots in it.

"I think I have some carrots somewhere", said a man who was watching the whole thing. He ran home and quickly came back with a handful, which he handed over to the traveler. The traveler continued to stir his concoction. Every time he would taste the soup, he would smack his lips and declare it the best ever, but would quickly add that it would taste better if only it had this or that. Cries of "I have leftover meat," or "I have some onions," "I have salt," and "I have pepper," sprang forth from the crowd. People offered all kinds of stuff from their garden or pantry in the hope that the soup would taste better.

In the meantime, the waiting crowd sat down, exchanged pleasantries, and even played music. Everyone agreed that it was the most fun they'd had in a long time. Pretty soon, the soup was starting to smell really good. The traveler took another sip of the soup and declared it done. One by one the villager's bowls were filled by the traveler, and together they sat down to enjoy one another's company over a good bowl of stone soup.

As he prepared to move on, all of the villagers thanked the traveler for the marvelous stone soup and asked him for the secret. The villager elder even offered the traveler a great deal of money for the magic stone, but he refused to sell it. Then the traveler departed for the next village. On the way out of the village, the traveler came upon a group of village children standing near the road. He gave the silken bag containing the stone to the youngest child, whispering to the group, "It was not the stone, but the villagers that performed the magic."



In our passage for today, God comes to a man and woman who are ninety-nine and ninety years old, respectively, and makes an amazing claim. Even more amazing than making soup from a stone, God tells Abram and Sarai that they will have a child. But wait, not only that, God tells them that they will become the ancestors of a multitude of nations. God claims that their descendants will be as numerous as the grains of sand on the seashore. And wait – there is more – kings will come from their line. Along the way, Abram becomes Abraham and Sarai becomes Sarah. There is significance in this as well.

God changes their names for a reason. God had promised Abram that he would have a son and that it would be through his wife Sarai. Abram means "exalted father". As we recall how his story unfolded, the meaning of his original name may have proven to be an embarrassment because Abram and Sarai are without children of their own. God himself gives him the name "Abraham", which means "father of many". This reinforces God's promise to Abraham that he would not only have a son through Sarai, but also that he would be the father of many nations. This comes true through Ishmael, Isaac, and the sons of Keturah -- the wife he took after Sarah died.

Sarai also has her name changed. God renames her Sarah. The difference is subtler, the meaning changing from "princess" to "princess of many". This does not refer to many nations, but to many people. This is significant because Sarah was the mother of one nation, while Abraham was the father of many nations. Still, the name comes from God and is a sign of the promise God had made to her as well.

For a moment, let us stand in Abram and Sarai's shoes. Just imagine being ninety-nine and ninety and God again coming to you, telling you that you will finally have a child. Remember, it was years ago that they first received the promise. In Genesis 15, God initially makes the covenant with Abram. He tells him to look to the sky and tells Abram that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars. Abram believes God and it is credited to him as righteousness. But time passes. They get a bit impatient and Abram is convinced by Sarai to sleep with Hagar, her slave girl, so that Sarai can "obtain children by her". These words reveal the selfish nature of the decision. As we recall, this does not work out well and eventually Hagar and Ishmael are driven off. They eventually become the ancestors of another nation, fulfilling God's promise to make Abram a father of many nations.

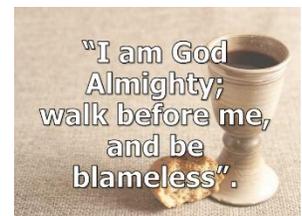
So here they are, Abram almost one hundred years old and Sarai ninety years old. God tells them that a baby is soon on the way. Sarai has been barren for all her life. She has lived with the scorn and the pain of inadequacy all her life. They have tried and tried to have children. As God speaks to them and makes this covenant promise, they must have felt like their pots were empty. So many years, failure after failure, so much pain. How could they even begin to make sense of this promise? How could God possibly keep this promise?

In our Lenten study, What Makes a Hero, author Matt Rawle presents the idea that in the Bible we often see that there is a clear choice between right and wrong or a clear course of action that would be pleasing to God. Even though Abram and Sarai have been faithful, they find themselves barren, without children. Then they receive the promise that a child is on the way.

God has spoken, so it must be true. Of course, obedience is the right choice. But they too know their reality. The right choice would be to be patient, to trust into God's plan. But the path or best choice is not always clear and it is sometimes difficult to follow. We read in the scriptures that the rain falls on righteous, and on the unrighteous. This leads us to ask, is choosing or doing the right thing always rewarded? Is the 'reward' what we expect or desire? Because what we expect or desire does always not occur one hundred percent of the time, sometimes it is hard to always do the right thing, to always make the right choice, to be obedient to God.

By contrast, our pop culture heroes always do the right things. Our comic book, novel, and movie heroes always make the right choice. This week in our small group study we meet Spider Man. Think for a minute about Spiderman. He always defeats villain, does his homework, and then eats dinner with Aunt May. Spider Man does so because these are the right things to do. In general, we find that most hero stories present a clear picture of right and wrong. Our heroes have a strict moral code that triumphs over the villain's evil and chaotic worldview. But for us, mere mortals that we are, we cannot always choose right and we cannot constantly triumph over evil. These are promises we cannot keep. Often scripture, too, makes a strong distinction between right and wrong.

For this reason, our passage begins with these words from God to Abram: *"I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless"*. It is interesting that the covenant begins with Abram receiving a command to walk righteously. Previously, Adam was created in the image of God and Noah was found to be a righteous man, blameless



among the people of his day. Abraham, however, did not initially measure up to that standard. His past was a bit more checkered. But as time passed, Abram's faith grew and his walk was fully with the Lord.

On our faith journey, we find that God sees us for who we are as well as the possibility of what we can become in Him. For this reason, God never gives up on us either. God calls us to be holy, to walk blamelessly with Him. Of course, on our own, this is a promise we can't keep. But as Abram learns in our passage today, and as we learn on our faith journeys, all things are possible with God.



At this point in the evolving story, God had already blessed Abram in many ways, so he had the assurance that God was with him. As we continue on our own faith journeys, we too

come to experience God's activity in our lives. As we come to know God's blessings more and more, we too gain the assurance that God is with us. But in our story today, Abram had yet to fully surrender to God. It was not that he was full of blame, but was not totally blameless either. Yet in Abram and in Sarai, God sees the promise. When God looks within them, He sees that they do have faith. Faith is why God chose Abram and Sarai to be the ancestors of His chosen people. As we remember their story, though, we soon see that they do some awful things to their own family and they tell big lies when it suits their own interests. They do have faith, but at times they are selfish and, at times, they do stumble. In these ways, Abram and Sarai are just like you and me. At times we are selfish, at times we allow our will to trump God's will in our lives. At times we are sinful, allowing the evil in the world to triumph in our lives.

Yet when God looks at Abram and Sarai, He first sees faith. When God is looking to do something new, to make a new nation, a beloved people, He chooses Abraham and Sarah because of their faith. God's first instruction in our passage today was to walk blameless, to continue to be holy. As God looks a little deeper at the father and the mother of nations, God also sees something else. Our God is also the God of the lost and the broken. God sees and is drawn to their barrenness. An empty pot is an opportunity for God to be at work. An empty pot is an opportunity to fill someone with His love and grace.

At times in our lives, we too feel like we have nothing to offer. At times, it feels as if our well has run dry, as if we too were an empty pot. And sometimes our faith feels a bit barren and dry. When we find ourselves in these places of pain, may we remember Abraham and Sarah. Seemingly against all odds and certainly against all human logic, God recognized their faith and He chose to fill their empty pots. God took their barren, empty pots and brought forth a bounty of love and grace as He began to birth His community of faith. You and I have descended from Abraham and Sarah. We are the continuation of their line. Between them and us we find Jesus, our true hero, the supreme example of God's love and grace in the world. Through faith, we also come to believe that God wants to fill us up, to bring joy and hope into our lives, and to help us become who He created us to be.





When we jump forward to the New Testament, we see that Jesus is a hero not because He always fights for what is right and never does what is wrong. In the same way, the

Christian calling is not about always being right, and it certainly isn't about never doing wrong. Our role as disciples is to continue God's story and continuing that story means doing what is holy. Our Christian life is not a series of choices between right and wrong; rather the Christian life is about our relationship with God and with one another. Jesus redefined the rules and brought them to completion so that we might be a holy people. This is how Jesus is different than secular heroes. He defines what is holy.

When we stumble, grace brings us back into a right relationship with God and with each other, making us holy and perfect in His sight. Love is what fills us up and what we take forth into the world, building relationships with one another. This week, may we be holy, bringing God the glory in all we say and do. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) How could you grow in your faith this week so your walk more blameless and more holy?
- 2) Where or how do you need God to fill your pot? Spend some time in prayer this week seeking God's activity in your life.
- 3) What right choices can you make to better represent God this week? What wrong choices can you avoid to better represent God this week?