

Promises Made Promises Kept

Second Sunday in Lent
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Sunday, February 28, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

They promised us they would come back to get it. Several years ago, when my husband Randy and I purchased a compact, energy-efficient freezer, we were assured that the company, upon delivering the new freezer, would (for 1-cent more) haul away our old freezer. (That was part of their advertising ploy to get folks to purchase a new freezer. It worked.) Of course, that agreement was reached at the store where we bought our new freezer, and the sales clerk did not know how our basement was configured or how big the old freezer was.

The men who actually delivered the new freezer and brought it down our basement steps entered our laundry room to take a gander at the old freezer they were to haul away. They looked it up and down, then joked that our house probably had been built **around** the freezer. They might not have been far from the truth there. We thought back to when we purchased our home from the previous owner, and we wondered why they were so adamant that we keep their freezer. Please, keep it. We realize now they didn't think they could get the freezer out of the basement, either!

The men who delivered our new freezer moved the old one out of the way, set up the new one, plugged it in, and then attempted to haul the old freezer out. Try as they might, they could not bring it up the basement steps. They said we would have to remove the wooden banister that travels up the length of the basement steps. They said they didn't do banisters. They said we would need to re-schedule the haul-away with the company. And they left our big, old, electricity-guzzling upright freezer at the bottom of our basement steps.

The store where we bought the freezer said they would honor their promise to haul the old one away, as long as we removed the banister. So Randy carefully removed the banister and we called to reschedule a haul-away day. The company said they'd get to us in the next week sometime. OK. We had to rely on their promise. That was all we had to go on. We had to wait for their promise to be fulfilled.

Now, it's not easy to wait for a promise to be fulfilled. You and I have been burned before by promise-makers, and as they say, "Once burned, twice shy." At the same time that Randy was dutifully removing the banister, he had me looking up in the classified ads those folks who offer things like this: "Will haul away anything. Will do heavy lifting." Of course, such a job would come at a price---certainly more than the 1-cent we paid the appliance store for the initial haul-away. Yet we figured it was our only option. It's clear we didn't have much faith in the promise-

maker. All we could see was a big freezer permanently located at the bottom of our basement steps.

Our reaction to their promise was basically Abram's first reaction to the Lord God and his promise. Now, previous to today's lesson in Genesis, God called Abram and promised him land. (By the way, note that Abram and Sarai have not yet been given new names by the Lord God yet—that will happen later on in Genesis, when they are called their more familiar names, Abraham and Sarah.) Anyway, the Lord God said in back in chapter 12, "Go to the land I will show you. I will make of you a great nation. I will bless you." And with that promise of a home and descendants to fill it, Abram and his wife Sarai go on a journey of faith.

Except you might say there's a big, old upright freezer sitting at the bottom of their basement steps. First of all, they weren't exactly sure where God was leading them, and, second, God had not provided them any collateral so that they could trust the promise would come true. That made the journey very difficult, and the faith necessary for the journey almost unattainable.

Now, when we reach the point in their journey where today's lesson takes place, significant time has passed. They have arrived at Canaan, the land promised to them by God, but it isn't exactly theirs. Not yet. Other peoples who do not follow the Lord God still inhabit the land. But more crucial here is that **no child** has been yet born to them. Once again, the Lord God speaks and makes a promise: "Abram, I am your shield; your reward will be great." It is not at all surprising that Abram is rather skeptical at these words. Why should he and Sarai continue to believe the promise-maker, when evidence is to the contrary? Abram is not quite sure he can believe this promise of an heir. Like my husband and I scouring the classified ads for someone to haul the old freezer away for a price because we're not certain the appliance store can or will fulfill its vow, Abram looks around and sees only one possible heir to the land he doesn't truly even possess yet. The heir-apparent apparently is going to have to be Eliezer, his **slave**. Not what Abram wants, but Eliezer is the only person available. Abram points this out to the Lord God—that what's going to happen is that he will die and his servant, not a son, will get his land. For Abram, this "reward" of land God promises means nothing is there is no real heir of his to inherit it. Abram and Sarai are old, and this promise of a future requires the very concrete matter of a son...NOW. Abram is asking for collateral on the promise.

In today's passage, there are several movements. First, there is the Lord God's initial promise and second, Abram's blunt skepticism. Third, there is the Lord God's reiteration of the promise. See, that's how God responds to Abram's skepticism—he simply repeats the promise. He says, "The slave is not going to be your heir. It will be a child of your own who will get the land." Then, fourth, God takes Abram outside, shows him the multitude of stars in the sky, and says, "If you can count them, that's how many descendants you will have."

Hmmm...well, I wouldn't exactly call the stars in the sky collateral. God still hasn't provided anything concrete that Abram can touch and hold and keep until the promise is fulfilled. All the Lord God has done is offer his word...again.

The fifth movement comes from Abram. And his move, frankly, is a surprise. Once burned, twice shy? Apparently not. Though there is no indication Sarai is getting pregnant anytime soon, even so, Abram chooses to believe God's word. He accepts God's promise, without collateral in hand, without finding an infant at Sarai's breast, without having anything they could touch and hold and keep.

The writer Fred Buechner says that faith is a journey without maps. That's a perfect description of the experience of Abram and Sarai. They have been called to go where God leads them and they don't have a map, literally or figuratively. God offers them his word. That is all they have to rely on. And they will have to wait for the promise to be fulfilled.

If we are surprised at Abram's faith, then it's because we have forgotten from where faith comes. This was not some superhuman moral decision on Abram's and Sarai's part to accept what God said. Truth is, by the next chapter they are faltering in their trust once more, and this has dangerous consequences: Abram agrees to impregnate Sarai's maidservant Hagar, because they think that is their only option for an heir. No, Abram and Sarai did not come to any faith or trust on their own—they simply couldn't create faith in themselves. The God who had created life in them was at work creating faith in Abram and Sarai—something they could not achieve on their own. See, only God, with his power at work in our lives, can make his promises believable. Faith is always and ultimately a gift from God.

You probably want to know that the big, old freezer was finally hauled away, as the company promised. Without the banister, and with the freezer nearly deconstructed by the guys who came to our house, its various parts were finally taken out of our basement. **Phew!**

In a world where you and I are often skeptical of the promises made to us, and in a world where promises often go unfulfilled by human hands, our Lord God continues to be the promise-maker for us. He promises to forgive us. He promises to care for us like a mother hen gathering her brood under her wings. He promises to guide us through life, strengthen us, and to bring us at last into his home for eternity. No, he doesn't give us a handy map (or GPS) for the journey, but we have his word.

And that word took on flesh and dwelt among us in Jesus Christ. That word is received by us in this holy supper when we are nourished by Christ's body and blood. (Which is, by the way, a concrete moment in time that we can touch and taste.) And it nourishes the budding faith God is creating in us. You might call the Lord's Supper "collateral," helping us this day believe both the promise **and** the promise-maker. **AMEN.**

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