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Lent 2C
Peace, Seattle
February 4, 2013
Genesis 15:1-18; Luke 13:31-35

ONE STRAIGHT LINE

This whole SONICS RETURN TO SEATTLE THING is beginning to resemble a soap opera.

- Sonics are sold away to Oklahoma…the City mourns.
- An unknown moneybags starts buying up property in SODO…rumors fly.
- Sacramento Kings head for bankruptcy…hope is kindled.
- A new arena is proposed for SODO …lawsuits fly.
- The big announcement comes: THE KINGS ARE IN THE BAG… but by the time you hit the REFRESH button, complications have arisen.
- And Friday, THE PORT'S LAWSUIT IS THROWN OUT…leading to another round of celebrating on the part of some and hand wringing on the part of others.

It's the true Seattle way, isn't it?! Nothing ever happens in a straight line.

The same thing could be said about God's story of promise: it never unfolds in a straight line. And if we need any Biblical "poster children" to verify that truth, we need go no further than Abram and Sarai.

Their story in Genesis begins with them facing the void, for when we hear their names for the first time in chapter 11, one crucial detail stands out: there will be no children; the biological clock has stopped ticking altogether.

YET, a few verses later God enters the picture with a promise that comes streaking across Abram's consciousness like a 7,000-ton meteor,[1] and is equal parts expansive and improbable.

PROGENY, LAND, AND A BEVY OF BLESSINGS WHOSE RIPPLES WILL SPREAD TO THE WHOLE KNOWN WORLD.

Time passes, however, the brightness of the promise fades, and Abram begins to wonder.

Enter our text for today, in which Abram begins to take God to task for a promise that, from where he stands, seems a distant and unattainable dream.

LOOK, he tells the Lord, YOU MADE A PROMISE, BUT HAVE GIVEN ME NO CHILDREN, AND SO A SLAVE BORN IN MY HOUSE WILL END UP MY HEIR. WHAT GIVES?

The LORD responds with reassurance, and offers a new sign:

GO ON, COUNT THE STARS, IF YOU CAN, God says.
SO SHALL YOUR DESCENDANTS BE.

This story is about several things. It's about the honesty of relationship between Abram and God, an honesty that isn't afraid to bring life's toughest questions to bear.

And it's about how we deal with our expectations of God when things aren't going the way we hoped—the way we understood they would be.

[1] Meteor in Russia, 2-15-13

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But it is also, and fundamentally, a story about the journey from suspicion to belief,[2] and how God keeps faith with Abram, affirms the relationship, affirms the covenant, and provides Abram with the room, with the spaciousness, he needs to do the same.

> AND ABRAM BELIEVED THE LORD,
> AND THE LORD RECKONED IT TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.

A colleague of mine was once traveling in Israel on a journey through the holy land, when his car broke down. Well, he managed to get it towed to a local mechanic who set to working on it. And after he'd found the problem, replaced the part, and got it running again, the mechanic summed up the car's status with one Hebrew word: **ZADIK. Zadik.**

It's the same word the storyteller uses in verse 6, a word that comes into English as "RIGHTEOUS." In a word, it means everything is RIGHT—everything is doing what it's supposed to do.

When Abram believes the LORD's promise, when he trusts God, what that trusting means, in effect, is: THIS RELATIONSHIP IS DOING WHAT IT'S SUPPOSED TO DO: THIS RELATIONSHIP WORKS.

Of course, if you remember the story, you know things don't remain this way for long. There are other incidents down the road that will test Abram's faith and God's patience.

THIS, the story reminds us, COMES WITH THE TERRITORY OF FAITH.
Faith feels at times more like the tide that ebbs and flows rather than a solid, immovable object.

And that, somehow, seems more appropriate, at least to me, because this path of life and faith we're on is as much about the journey as it is about the destination.

And in case we missed that, we have verses 13-16 (which Barbara read but which, curiously, are omitted from the lectionary) putting it in front of us plain and simple.

> "Know this for certain," says the Lord, "your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years; [14]but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions….[16]And they shall come back here in the fourth generation.

Straight line from promise to fulfillment? No. The story of promise never unfolds in a straight line. There are twists and turns, reversals, cul-de-sacs. There are points when God's purposes and path seem perfectly clear and other points when God is silent, and points when God's intentions seem shrouded in an impenetrable mystery.

There are times when Abram—when we—feel compelled to leave the route where the trail has petered out, and to strike out on our own, in a new direction. And times when we're so out of sync with God that we feel like we've lost our compass altogether.

How do we keep on trusting when things aren't as they should be?

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[2] Kenyatta Gilbert, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) p. 51.

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God seems to be putting Abram on notice in verses 13-16, as if to say: "This issue of trust, which is personal to you, Abram, is going to be an issue for your people for hundreds of years to come."

And, as it turns out, for us, too.

How do we keep faith when, as we'll pray this morning, the longed for baby lives for only an hour after birth before he dies? Or when the results are malignant, not benign?

How do we keep faith when a relationship we've built our life around crumbles, or we fall off the wagon, or lose our job?

God's response to the questions we carry in our heart of hearts, is not a cerebral one, nor is it a distant scolding, nor is it silence.

God's response is to set everything divine aside, to take on the blood, sweat, and tears of humanity, and to enter our story. But he does so <u>not</u> as a king or a general; <u>not</u> as a president or a pharaoh. <u>Not</u> from above…but from <u>below</u>.

The God we meet in Jesus is a God who weeps <u>over</u> us and weeps <u>with</u> us. Who speaks truth to power but who will <u>not take up</u> the tactics of the powerful. Who chooses for his image from the animal kingdom, not the great eagle, the lion of Judah or the warhorse, but the mother hen.

> Jerusalem, Jerusalem, city that kills the prophets and stones whose who are sent to it!
> How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

There's only one straight line in this story, and it leads to the cross.

And as we journey there, with Jesus, we journey together. Carrying with us all the unanswered questions, for sure. And by daring to share them, spreading the load.

"I have found only one religion that dares to go down with me into the depth of myself," wrote G. K. Chesterton.[3] And this Lenten journey takes us there.

So let's touch our fingers to the water and make the sign; let's offer our estimates of giving with the faith that our bold sharing will by God's grace enable the mission of our congregation to go forward with strength rather than caution.

And let's come to the Table. For here our Lord, crucified and risen, promises to meet us again and again. To knit us to each other, and to use us—yes, us—to make this world whole.

Amen.

[3] Quoted by Edna Hong in her article *Looking Inside*, in the collection: *Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter.* (New York: Maryknoll, 2003) p. 25