Living Ink: Embodying God’s Story

Lent 2, February 21, 2016

Genesis 15:1-12. 17-18

When the promise is first given, it comes with a call for Abram to step out in faith, to follow God’s call to an unknown land and an unknown future: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (12:1-3) He and Sarah pack up all their possessions, and head out with Abram’s nephew Lot.

There is, however, one barrier to the promise that we are told about in 11:30 before the promise is ever given. It’s a small, almost throw-away verse, 2 phrases, really, but they say the same thing: Now Sarah was barren; she had no child. This will need to be overcome if the promise is to be fulfilled.

The promise comes a second time a few verses later in chapter 12 after they enter the land of Canaan: “To your offspring, I will give this land” (v 7). In Shechem, by the oak of Moreh, Abram builds an altar to the Lord in response to this promise. But still, there is no child.

They move on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and he builds another altar to the Lord. He continues on in stages toward the Negeb.

A famine hits the land, and Abram and Sarah move to Egypt, where Abram fears that because of Sarah’s great beauty, he will be killed if the people know he is Sarah’s husband, so he asks her to pose as his sister. He does this a second time in chapter 20, and it is then that we learn that she is indeed his half sister. So, he is not lying, but he is also not telling the truth, something that perhaps concerns us, but is not a concern of the text. **And** he gives his wife to another man, in order to protect himself; the text is concerned about the fact that Sarah is put in jeopardy because of Abraham’s need to protect himself—the fact that Pharaoh and his house are afflicted with great plagues—does that include Sarah?—but it isn’t concerned with the fact that he gave his wife to another man.

After Pharaoh finds out that Sarah is Abram’s wife, they leave Egypt and head back to the Negeb. At the beginning of chapter 13, we are told that Abram is “very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold.” (13:2) Abram journeyed on by stages from the Negeb as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, back to the place where he had made an altar at the first; and there Abram called on the name of the Lord. Here in this place, Abram lets Lot choose where he would like to settle, and Abram takes what remains. We are told that their possessions are so great that the land would not support both of them living together, so they need to settle in different places.

It is here that the promise comes a third time: “Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. Rise up, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you.” Again, the promise is uttered; still, there is no child. And by now it seems as if the promise of offspring and land is even further away than in the beginning, for Abraham has back-tracked across the land he had so confidently crossed earlier. What is to come of the land that he is promised? What about the many offspring he will have, as numerous as the dust of the earth? How will this promise unfold?

And then Lot is captured during a battle in the Valley of Siddim. When Abram is told this, he took his trained men and pursued Lot and his captors, and freed him, bringing him back. He is praised by King Melchizedek of Salem for his bravery and success; Abram refuses to keep any proceeds of the battle, so that the King of Sodom will not take credit for Abram’s wealth.

The fourth time the promise comes is in our passage from Genesis 15, which begins: “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.’” It would seem as if these words have come out of the blue; was Abraham afraid? When did he voice his fears to God? Of what is he afraid?

And then we find out: “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus? You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.”

And there it is—his fear that God’s promise won’t be fulfilled, that his future won’t look as he had been imagining it; his fear that God can’t be trusted. He had trusted God and literally given up everything to move and follow God’s leading. He had trusted each time God had uttered the promise—you will have this land; I will give you offspring as numerous as the dust of the earth and the stars in the heavens. And yet, here he was without even one child.

Abraham is torn between trust in God, and fear and doubt that what God said would ever happen. We, too, find ourselves often in this place—this place where fear lodges itself somewhere in our body, maybe our guts, churning and swirling; maybe our chest, heart pounding; maybe our throat, choking our ability to speak or swallow. And as fear takes hold of us, so too does doubt, leading us to question everything we’ve ever known and believed; leaving us to wonder—on what can we count? Who is reliable? Can God be trusted?

Present in so many stories in the Bible are the words, spoken from God’s mouth, prophets mouths or on the lips of Jesus: “Do not fear”. To the Israelites in battle, God says, “Do not fear, for I am fighting for you; I go before you; I am with you.” To those in exile, the prophets said, “Do not fear, for God is with you.” To the disciples in the boat on the stormy Sea of Galilee, Jesus says, “Do not fear”. Over and over again, these words, ‘do not fear’ appear in our scriptures, reassuring, comforting, strengthening. Over and over again, these words of courage and comfort come to those in fear, those caught by the storms of life, those gripped by seemingly impossible and hopeless situations.

Fear is so much a part of who we are as human beings. We live in fear of the future; we lie awake at night worried about our job security, or our bank account, or in fear that our child won’t make it home safely, that our children won’t live to adulthood, that something will happen to a family member; we wait anxiously by the phone, for the results of a medical test. We read the news, fearful for the headlines, anxious about the state of the world, our feeling of fear increasing with each turn of the page, each click of the mouse.

We live in fearful times, and we live in a time where fear is used as a way to keep us in our place, to paralyze us. We have access to news of world events, and the prevalence of bad news and violence and mass shootings keeps us in a state of fear. Politicians, too, need to keep us in a state of fear by pointing out those who want to get in to the country to terrorize us; by saying we all need to carry guns so that we are safe—so our children are safe; that we have to keep socialism out so that no one else determines who gets health care treatment and who doesn’t. Politicians, rather than reassuring us that all will be well, need us to be fearful so that we are more likely to see them as our saviours; they heighten our fear by labelling groups of people as terrorists. They keep us fearful so that we won’t be inclined toward compassion and welcome. Fear is a great controller, and the more we fear the stranger, the one who is not like us, the more we will work to keep others out and everything the way it is. If we are controlled by fear, then we will be more likely to see the stranger, the immigrant, the newcomer to our cities and communities as the reason that unemployment is high, crime is high, housing prices have dropped. In fear, we are more likely to see the other as the problem, and blame them for all that is wrong with “this country”. Fear controls us and keeps us from reaching out to the other. Fear keeps us isolated and alone, trapped in our homes, our lives, our bodies, trusting no one and nothing. Fear keeps us from being able to trust the promise that all will be well; fear leads us to question the presence of the One who repeatedly says, “Do not be afraid; I am with you.” Fear robs us of a future of hope and fulfillment.

Into Abraham’s fear comes God’s disruptive, “fear not”, shattering the hold that fear was beginning to take. Into Abraham’s fear, God speaks a question that invites Abraham back into relationship. Faithfulness doesn’t mean not having any questions; faithfulness is speaking the questions we have in the presence of the One who walks with us in our fear and says, ‘fear not’. God invites Abraham to give voice to his fear, and in so doing, invites him into a life of deeper faith and trust. Abraham’s concern isn’t what God can do for him, and how God can give him what he wants; Abraham’s concern is how and when God will do what God has promised to do.

God speaks into Abraham’s fear and invites Abraham’s questions. God’s response is to again promise that Abraham’s offspring will be as numerous as the stars in the heavens. God doesn’t give Abraham a timeline for when that will happen, nor does God say how it will happen; but the fact that God answers is enough for Abraham to believe and trust in God. It is this kind of faith that is affirmed—faith that prevails even in the midst of hopelessness and barrenness; faith that relies on the One who makes promises, even when those promises don’t appear to be fulfilled. God’s ‘do not fear’ disrupts Abraham’s orientation around what he can see and touch and manage, and orients him, instead, to the One who makes the promises. (Brueggeman, *Genesis*, p. 144) And it is that re-orientation that makes Abraham a model of faith. From Abraham we learn that faithfulness isn’t about having all the answers, or not having any questions; faithfulness asks questions and acknowledges fear so that in those questions we can be re-oriented toward God who is always faithful. And we also learn that the faith to which Abraham is called is a hard-fought one; not a peaceful, pious one. Abraham isn’t a passive recipient of faith, but an active participant in claiming and living his faith. (Brueggeman, p. 141) I think this is important to remember; faith doesn’t come easily or even gently, but comes as we grapple and wrestle. For both Abraham and Sarah, the desire was there to follow God; but there was great struggle in doing so and living into God’s promise. (Kenyatta R. Gilbert, *Feasting on the Word*, p. 55)

This Lenten season, we are pondering how it is that we embody God’s story, but I think it is also helpful to think about how God’s story is embodied in us. We live out the story of God in our world, and we carry, in our bodies, the story of how God is at work and has been at work in our own lives. Our bodies know things and carry stories that our conscious mind often isn’t aware of. Our bodies tell us things that our minds are too distracted to see and know. Our bodies know how hard it is to live into God’s promise and hope.

So I’d like to end with a few minutes of embodiment; of paying attention to our bodies and how they are telling the story of God’s presence and activity. I would invite you for a moment, to close your eyes, and turn your attention toward your body. What does it know? What story is it carrying that it would like to tell? And particularly this morning, direct your attention to the place where fear is holding you in its grip. Where in your body, is your fear lodged? What story does it want to tell? If you are comfortable, place your hand on that part of your body; acknowledge the fear. Listen to it. Let your body tell this story to you in God’s presence. Invite God to be present with you in your fear.

And now hear these words from God: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. Do not fear, for I am with you.

Let it be so.