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3-13-22
Genesis 15: 1-12, 17-18
Healing Through Remembering

We are approaching our Lenten journey to the cross and the empty tomb this year through the lens of healing, with an understanding of healing that is different than being cured. To be cured is to be returned to a pre-diseased state, while healing calls us to become whole in body, mind and spirit. It is a call to resilience, to hope, to an abundant and expansive life. Last week we considered how an orientation of giving of ourselves, of our first fruits can be part of our healing. This week we look at the power of remembering – remembering to whom we belong. So hear now these words from Genesis 15, words that remind us of God's promises and their fulfillment.

Genesis 15: 1-12, 17-18

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." But Abram said, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." But the word of the Lord came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir." The Lord brought Abram outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then the Lord said to him, "So shall your descendants be." And Abram believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Then the Lord said to Abram, "I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess." But Abram said, "O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" The Lord said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." Abram brought the Lord all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

You gotta love a passage of scripture that starts out with the words "Do not be afraid." In scripture that is the equivalent of "once upon a time..." It not only cues us that something dramatic is about to happen, but it is like a string tied to our fingers – a reminder that God is with us on this journey. We find our protagonist Abram (the Lord has not yet changed his name to Abraham) encountering God in a vision. A bit earlier in the book of Genesis, the Lord has promised to make Abram into a great nation, telling him: "Look around from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if

anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.”¹

And Abram followed the Lord’s commands, and yet he finds himself and his wife Sarai advanced in years, with still no offspring. Now we often lift up great biblical figures like Abraham and Sarah as paragons of virtue, responding to God’s call without hesitation, sometimes forgetting that they have very human responses to the situations they find themselves in. Yes, I trust you God....but ... but...I have a few questions. I’m not sure how I see this working. Abram said (and when I read it I can almost hear it as a whine), “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” And Abram continued, “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.”

I feel for Abram. He is thinking, yes, God you made a promise and yet here I am, no children to be my heir. And then God reminds him...God takes him outside his tent and has him look up at the stars and God reminds him of the promise that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars. And scripture tells us that Abram believed the Lord. The Hebrew can also be translated that Abram trusted God. I like that translation as it indicates a relationship between Abram and the Lord.

The Lord, knowing that while Abram confessed that he trusted the Lord, knew that he still might have some doubts, so the Lord reminded Abram that he had brought him from his homeland of Ur into the land he was now inhabiting – the land of Canaan. And because Abram still had questions, the Lord made a promise – a covenant with Abram. And the Lord didn’t just make a verbal promise – it was enacted – it was made visible. Abram brought before the Lord birds and animals and Abram cut the animals in half. And when it was dark, fire passed between the pieces – a ritual act to signify the covenant.

For some the term “ritual” has a negative association – something we do that is repetitive, maybe even obsessive. The repetition of the ritual causes the action to become rote, and meaning is lost or diminished. As people of faith we understand that ritual can have deep meaning. Ritual is a tangible way that we connect our individual story to the bigger Christian story, to the story of our faith. Rituals provide contrast - they distinguish the ordinary from the unique. And rituals like baptism and communion provide a way to pass knowledge from one generation to the next - they are a way we make and transmit memories.

Scripture witnesses to the importance and power of memories in our faith history. Throughout the Old Testament the Israelites remember God’s covenant to Noah, to Abraham and to David. They remember their deliverance from slavery and they remember Zion when exiled in Babylon. In fact, the act of “remembering” was commanded in scripture – listen to these words from Deuteronomy 8: “Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you

¹ Genesis 13:14-17

out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.... But remember the Lord your God...so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors.”²

In the New Testament biblical mandates of remembering are woven into the fabric of the lives of the disciples and the early church. And “remembering” becomes a spiritual discipline. Memories give us tether points along our journey and shape our identity. Jesus instructs that his actions at the Last Supper be reenacted ritually “in remembrance” of him. He utters these words on what is to be perpetually “a day of remembrance” for the people of Israel – a time when they gathered to share the Passover meal. So for the gathered the disciples this was a time and space to remember all that God had done in their lives and the lives of their ancestors. For Israel, and the disciples, to remember was to obey God’s command.

Throughout our history as a church, to remember Jesus is to claim the consequences of his death and resurrection as a call on our lives to be members of the body of Christ. This calls us to hard places, to live lives which honor the sacrifice promised that night at the Last Supper. To remember that we are not Christians by ourselves. This kind of remembering is a continual process of glimpses of God’s grace amidst the realities of life. This kind of remembering is different than the dates and times of history classes or perpetual where did I leave my phone questions. And that is indeed good news for us. Because this type of remembering doesn’t diminish with age or disease processes. Instead it is deepened through the hills and valleys of our life together. Because it is the life together that Christ is calling us to. This kind of remembering is healing, as it connects us to the promises of God and the hope we have as children of God.

As we watch the unfolding horror and tragedy unfold in Ukraine, it is sometimes hard to see the task of remembering as healing. It is tempting to bury our heads in the sand and think about happier times. And yet we are called to remember – we are called to remember and hold people in power accountable for their actions and we are called to remember the countless people who are being Christ to each other.

In his essay *A Room Called Remember*, from the book of the same title, Presbyterian pastor and writer Frederick Buechner frames the power of this type of remembering, saying, “Remember what he (God) has done in the lives of each of us; and beyond that remember what he has done in the life of the world; remember above all what he has done in Christ-remember those moments in our own lives when with only the dullest understanding but with the sharpest longing we have glimpsed that Christ’s kind of life is the only life that matters and that all other kinds of life are riddled with death; remember those moments in our lives when Christ came to us in countless disguises through people who one way or another strengthened us, comforted us, healed us, judged us, by the power of Christ alive within them. All that is the past. All that is what there is to remember. And *because* that is the past, *because* we remember, we have this high and holy hope: that what he (God) has done, God will continue to do, that what God has begun in us and our world, God will in unimaginable ways bring to fullness and fruition.”³

² Deuteronomy 8:11-18

³ Frederick Buechner. *A Room Called Remember*. In: *A Room Called Remember. Uncollected Pieces*. Harper One, 1992 pp.11-12; quote can also be found at <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/blog/2016/5/16/to-wait-in-hope>

For Abram, God's promise was unimaginable – that he and his wife Sarai, old in age with no children, would have descendants as numerable as the stars – that these descendants would occupy the lands as far and wide as Abram could see. And yet God's promise was brought to fullness and fruition, to use Buechner poetic words. We live with this high and holy hope that what God has done, God will continue to do. That God will continue to shape us into a community of the beloved, a community where we care for neighbors whether they are sitting in the pew next to us or are a refugee from Afghanistan or the Congo or Ukraine; a community where we stand up to injustice and nurture our young and bear witness to the resurrection, singing with tears and in joy. And we remember ...we remember that God fulfills God's promises, not just to Abram but to each one of us. And that is part of our healing process. As we continue to heal and move toward wholeness, we must live as a people who remember, with hope in hearts and resolve in our step, with our arms open wide in embrace and with our tongues proclaiming praise. Join me in prayer.