



Trust and Love

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

Luke 13:31-35

Larry DeLong

February 28, 2010

These two quite different passages, spanning thousands of years, both talk about our relationship with God, but from different perspectives. In Genesis, the question is, what is God doing? And in Luke, Why won't people listen?

When God first revealed himself to Abraham, God didn't just say "get up and go." God actually made an agreement with Abraham, and like all proper agreements, it had mutual responsibilities. Abraham would go where God sent him and start a new nation, living in the land God gave them. In return, God would be *their* God, protecting and making them a great people. God tells Abraham, "I will bless those who bless you, and curse those who curse you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Abraham agreed, and picked up with all he had and left his ancestral home. Over the next ten or so years, he's travelled all over, and had some pretty difficult adventures: encountered famine, been kicked out of Egypt, argued with his nephew, Lot, then rescued Lot and his family from captivity.

There were a few clouds on the horizon. Abraham and his wife, Sarah, were childless, and Abraham was seventy-five at the time they first set out. How was this couple supposed to become a great nation without any progeny? And after years of wandering, being told to move here to there, why weren't they told to "stop *here* and start this great nation"? Come to think of it, the details of the agreement were a bit vague. Where's God, and where's his end of the bargain?

That's a familiar question. You, too, may have asked it, felt sometimes like your own trust and obedience seem to be the only activity in what's supposed to be a two-way relationship with God. We've done our part, God; now make good on some of your promises.

This is where Abraham is. He hasn't seen any results; he's been hearing that "the check's in the mail" for a very, very long time. So, he asks God what's going on. And

this marvelous and disturbing story results: God, creator of the universe, makes a covenant, more than an agreement, a full contract, with Abraham. In effect, he says: "I am God, and I said I would do these things. I will do them. You have my word on it." And God did, in time, fulfill those promises. This covenant is the foundation story of the Hebrew people.

Not everyone has Abraham's faith. He and Sarah are the Bible's great examples of faith and obedience, and one of the reasons is that they are exceptional, truly models of faith and perseverance. But we, too, may have gone years without feeling God's support. We're being faithful, and, like Abraham, trusting, but also like him, we sure would like a little reassurance.

Now Jesus' words in Luke come at this from the other side of the relationship. He's looking at things from God's side. Jesus sounds very much like one of the classic prophets, an Isaiah or Jeremiah, who see what God is doing but can't get anyone to pay attention. Jesus' words pour out the frustration, the heartache of God, and not just of God, but of every person who's ever tried to help someone who just won't be helped: "How often I've wanted to gather you...as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, (but) you were not willing!"

All I want to do is wrap my arms around you, hold you tight, and protect you! Can you feel that? Have you ever felt like that yourself, ached as you've asked, maybe even pleaded, with someone you care about, "please, please *just this once* listen to me; just this once, do what I say?"

You picture a prophet, and you picture a sour, angry old man yelling at people, constantly telling them what's wrong with them. Sometimes the church sounds like that, too. But honestly, have you ever done that yourself, tried to get someone to hear what they didn't want to hear? Can you blame those prophets for being a bit cranky? Might you have been yourself?

We can identify with both sides, can't we? When are we going to see results from God; when are they (whoever "they" are) going to straighten up?

The prophets were filled with God's Spirit, they knew in their own hearts the boundless love and care of God, they knew how laughably little response God would settle for if people would just listen and do what God wants. Not just for their own good, but for the good of all humankind, the whole world. But over and over, the only response the prophets seemed to get was, "Yeah, whatever."

And Jerusalem, the holy city, the city of God's own temple, seemed most resistant to God's influence. The center of worship, the destination of pilgrimages, pushed back when the prophets reminded them of God's covenant, of their part of the bargain. They were comfortable the way they were, and ignored the prophets' anguished expressions of God's love, his call for his people to come under his wings and let him love them.

The leaders that were supposed to be mediating God's love and justice to God's people persecuted and even killed God's messengers: "no good deed goes unpunished."

And so, too, Jesus' own frustration with the Pharisee's warning about Herod. The Pharisees are the heirs of those who killed the prophets before him. Why are they concerned about what happens to Jesus?

And Herod? He's basically, a county manager for the Romans. What's Herod to Jesus, the son of God, the Messiah? Jesus certainly won't run from him – in fact, he's heading toward him, toward Jerusalem, though not because of Herod: Jesus has a very important appointment of his own there, with his own Father.

In Genesis and Luke, on the one hand, we have Abraham, willing, but as yet unrewarded, and wondering; on the other hand, Jesus, willing, unrequited, and frustrated at those who have received the benefits of Abraham's promises, rewarded greatly, who aren't willing to keep up their end. And at the heart of everything, God.

Sunrise over the Santa Ritas can be spectacular. But have you noticed how quickly it changes appearance? Thursday, at first there were mysterious clouds around the mountaintops. Then, suddenly, the bottoms of the clouds turned bright red and orange, just breathtaking!

Then, just as suddenly, the red was gone, and it looked like threatening snow or rain, dark and ominous. The sun, still below the horizon, hit just the right angle, and its rays caught just one bank of clouds, facing away from Green Valley reflecting back, and suddenly a couple of the snow fields on the mountains turned yellow: what that must have looked like from on the mountain itself. And then, once again, everything grew dark – darker than it had been for quite a while, a deep darkness just before the sun finally broke through.

Heaven knows, and I we can understand, why Abraham got a bit anxious, wondering when his promises would start to become reality; just like that sunrise last Thursday, his experience was a mixture of beauty and threat, darkness and startling brilliance. But just like that sunrise, God's promises were being fulfilled, even if Abraham couldn't see it happening.

How much harder is it for us? Few of us – very possibly none of us – have the patience and trust of Abraham.

But God's love is real, and persists even when we don't feel it, just as the sun rises behind the clouds, though we can't see it. Not even the thickest, blackest cloud layer can completely keep the light of day away; the darkest day is still brighter than the lightest night.

Then this: Abraham, as he waited through a long, hot afternoon for God, chasing away the creatures who wanted to feast on the animals he'd sacrificed, fell into a "deep sleep," and "a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him." That's when God spoke his promise again, and in the midst of Abraham's foreboding and fear, after sunset, when true darkness reigned, God in the form of light, a firepot and a torch, passed between the sacrifices. That was what made the agreement between Abraham and God a

covenant, a contract, an unbreakable bond. Abraham trusted, though it would be many years before the promises of the covenant were realized.

And Jesus? Jesus was on his way to change everything, to make a new covenant with all humanity, not just one people. Jesus was on his way to show God's love for us by dying for us, walking toward the darkness of Good Friday to shine his light in the darkness of our lives – whether we see it or not. Jesus new and everlasting covenant – the New Testament – is with *us*.

Here we are, so contradictory, full of emotions and ideas pulling us this way and that, wondering where God is, running away from the help that's freely, lovingly offered to us. Still God puts us to use, on God's terms, according to his schedule, even, maybe especially, when we don't know it, don't feel it.

God works *with* us in fulfilling his promises. Though we are human beings, God's creation, though in the end we are his to command and bring into line, though throughout history we've been poor partners...God is faithful, and works *with* us. As God said to Abraham: "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." Those words include you and me, too. We are sent by God, used by God, to be a blessing to the world.