

Cutting A Deal
Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18
March 13, 2022

I need three volunteers. Two of you need to be able to lay on the floor and get up on your own. *(Have the two willing to lay on the floor stand together. The other volunteer stands by me.)*

If you are familiar with the Bible, a term you hear often is “covenant.” A modern day example is marriage vows in a wedding. You promise how you will treat one another in your marriage. Another modern day covenant happens when you buy a house. You make a covenant or agreement with the seller on price and how you will pay. The seller promises the house is in good condition or reveals to you any deficiencies. Often times, you will have a real estate agent or lawyer help broker the deal. And it involves lots and lots of paperwork.

In ancient times, there were no lawyers and no paperwork. Instead, they used a visual to show the seriousness of their agreement or covenant. You get some animals: a cow or a ram or a goat. And you cut them in half *(cut my two volunteers apart)*.

You lay out the halves across from each other with space between them, forming an aisle *(have the two volunteers lay down to demonstrate)*.

Turn to the remaining standing volunteer and tell them we are going to make a covenant, an agreement: So and so, I am going to buy your land, and I will pay you \$50,000 over a year’s time. *(I and volunteer begin to walk between the two “animal” halves.)* I say, “May I become like these animals if I fail to uphold my end of the covenant.”

Do you see the power in this? Your word was your bond. People trusted each other. This is how their society held together. The blood symbolized the life and death seriousness of this covenant making occasion. The blood sealed the sanctity of the promise.

This is where the phrase “to cut a deal” comes from. *(Thank the volunteers and send them back to their seat)*

Keeping this ceremony in mind, I am going to read our scripture passage. Before I do, let us pray: Stir in us now, Holy Spirit, a willingness to hear, the desire to know the truth and the courage to follow in joyful obedience, that we may be formed by your word into women and men of faith. Amen

As we pick up our scripture passage, previously God has promised to Abraham or Abram (as he is called in our passage) that he will be a father of a great nation, but Abram has some questions.

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision:

“Do not be afraid, Abram.

I am your shield,
your very great reward.”

² But Abram said, “Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?” ³ And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”

⁴ Then the word of the Lord came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.” ⁵ He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”

⁶ Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

⁷ He also said to him, “I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.”

⁸ But Abram said, “Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?”

⁹ So the Lord said to him, “Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.”

¹⁰ Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. ¹¹ Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away.

¹² As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him...

When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. ¹⁸ On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates—"

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Sometimes there are passages in scripture that are really hard to apply to today. This is one of them.

God makes a promise with Abraham that he will become a father of a great nation. There is a problem. Abraham is childless, and it looks he never will because he is getting old. Thus, Abraham has a question: How can I be a father of a great nation when I am not a father myself? Therefore, Abraham says, to be logical here I am going to take an heir from my servant. God politely declines and assures Abraham a child will come from his own old body.

The passage says Abraham believed. Often, we take this as a throw-away statement.

Keep in mind the culture of Abraham's day. People worshipped gods. People appeased their gods by offering sacrifices to keep the gods on their side. Give whatever they could to keep their favor. They kept "upping the ante" because they never really knew for sure if what they gave pleased their gods, so some would even sacrifice a child, the ultimate gift to a god. It was up to the people to make their god happy.

But what happens in this passage? God spends a lot of time insisting that God will do something for Abraham. God will do the giving, not Abraham. This was unheard of in its day. This goes against everything in Abraham's culture and what he knows. But Abraham believed God. Abraham was declared righteous, not because of all the wonderful things he did for God. He was declared right-with-God, or righteous, because he believed in God's promise.

What is interesting about Abraham's belief is that he still another question in the midst of that belief. God says he is going to give Abraham some land, and Abraham asks: "How can I know I will gain possession of it?" Abraham believed; he was declared righteous, and yet he still has questions.

Do you have questions for God? Questions can still persist in the midst of belief. In fact, we grow and learn about faith with our questions. We can rise to a higher level of faith with our questions even if we never get an answer in our lifetime. Abraham never saw the answer to his question, yet he believed.

What are your questions for God this morning? Let me tell you about a question I asked of God recently: God, I prayed (along with thousands, no...millions of others) that Russia would not attack Ukraine. So why did it happen? Why were our prayers not answered?

In the midst of my questions and my faith, I have been reading Psalm 10, which is helping me talk to God about this. This Psalm is called an imprecatory Psalm. Imprecatory Psalms are those that call down curses on enemies. These Psalms are hard to read in normal or easy times. But Imprecatory Psalms are made for moments like these in our world. They give us words to express our indignation at evil. And they ask God to do something about it.

Here is a portion of Psalm 10; it begins with the description of the enemy's destructive ways: "Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? In his arrogance the wicked man hunts down the weak, who are caught in the schemes he devises....He lies in wait near the villages; from ambush he murders the innocent...he catches the helpless and drags them off in his net. His victims are crushed, they collapse; they fall under his strength."

Yet, the Psalmist in the midst of his questions regarding this evil man, ends the Psalm in faith: "You hear, O Lord, the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry, defending the fatherless and the oppressed, in order that man, who is of the earth, may terrify no more."

I encourage you to read Imprecatory Psalms. Go on the computer and search Imprecatory Psalms and they will be listed for you. They can say what is in your heart when you do may not have courage to say it. These Psalms tell you it is okay to say these things and then give you the faith and hope to believe that it will be alright.

So I believe in the midst of the questions.

Back to Abraham's second question. Abraham asks his second question after God makes a promise that Abraham will take possession of the land: "But God, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?"

God says get a heifer, a goat and a ram, some birds.

Without being told what to do with animals, Abraham cuts them in half and arranges the halves opposite each other. Abraham is doing what the people in his day do when they make a covenant.

Then God makes Abraham wait all day, and Abraham spends the rest of the day driving away the birds of prey from the animal carcasses. Can you imagine the smell, the flies. Oh, the times we are called to wait. Sometimes in not pleasant circumstances. Yet, Abraham is serious in guarding what God has told him to do.

The sun sets, darkness comes, Abraham falls asleep. I love how this is described in our passage: a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. Did you know that God does some of God's best work in the dark?

Now, keep in mind that Abraham is asleep for the rest of the drama. He contributes nothing to what happens next, and what happens next is very strange: "A smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces." What in the world is going on? What is the smoking firepot and why is it passing between the animal pieces?

I think you can give a good guess. The smoking pot is the presence of God. God is passing through the animals alone. But if God and Abraham are making a covenant, why doesn't Abraham pass through the animals? Aren't both parties supposed to pass through when you cut a deal?

This cutting of the deal has taken an unexpected turn. God is making the commitment to uphold both ends of the deal. All the benefits and blessings from this deal is God's responsibility alone. If Abraham fails to do his part, if Abraham stops believing, God will be faithful and still give what God has promised. Abraham is being invited to trust God in this...that God will be faithful even when Abraham messes up.

Does this sound familiar? This is a picture of grace....my favorite word that I spoke to the children about. It's all God. Abraham just receives.

God is using a ceremony common in Abraham's culture to help Abraham understand God's faithfulness. God is taking the things of Abraham's world to communicate a promise, a covenant, the faithfulness and grace of God in a way he will remember.

How is God showing up in our world today? What is God doing in our thick and dreadful darkness? Maybe we can't answer that yet, but we keep on looking. Maybe we will never see the answers just as Abraham never saw his answer, but we can still count on the faithfulness of God. And we believe.

Two people have responded to God's faithfulness by responding to the call to be a Deacon in this church. The Deacons are the arms of this church. They oversee the ushers and greeters, they prepare communion elements, they run the golf carts, they oversee the fellowship time after worship (which by the way, starts next Sunday). They make sure people are visited in care facilities. They make hospital follow-up calls, birthday calls, caring cards, flower delivery. The list goes on.

A Deacon is an ordained position where they make a covenant with this church and God. We are going to do that now.

Craig calls up the two deacons.....