

“HOW WILL I KNOW?”
Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18 March 16, 2025
Second Sunday of Lent

The late management and life-planning guru **Stephen Covey** wrote a book some years back called **First Things First**. It's a handbook for living a joyful and productive life. Perhaps the best line in the book is its subtitle. Covey declares that the purpose of a human life can be summed up in four essential points, all of them beginning with the letter "L": "**to live, to love, to learn, to leave a legacy.**" This matter of leaving a legacy is something that concerns us all, in one season of life or another.

Contrary to the bumper sticker that reads, "**I'm spending my children's inheritance**", which is usually plastered on an expensive car or boat, most people want to leave something behind, to be remembered, to know they contributed to someone other than themselves, to hope that what they accomplished in life left the world a little better for the generations to follow.

When we read **Genesis 15**, we get the impression that Abraham and Sarah, although, to be perfectly accurate, at this point in their journey, we ought to call them by their original names, **Abram and Sarai**, are also concerned about the passing years and their legacy. God had made some promises of land, fatherhood of a great nation, and blessing. So far, they have left their ancestral home, traveled about Canaan, suffered a famine, got stuck in Egypt where Sarai's virtue was at stake, had a quarrel with the extended family that resulted in a split tribe, then got into a battle to rescue Abram's nephew, and to top it off they still have no son. Where is this great nation coming from?

Abram is in a **faith crisis**. Does he continue to trust in the promises of God, especially when the promises are delayed or does he take matters into his own hands? We feel for the man. We too wonder do we act and do we wait and how long do we have to wait? Poor Abram and Sarai have to wait 25 years between the promise and its fulfillment, and even then, it was incomplete. Patience in faith is not easy, especially when the journey is long.

I. COUNTERINTUITIVE

Once there was a couple whose female dog had 6 puppies. They already had three other dogs, so they tried to give the puppies away for free. However, they had no takers. The next day the couple changed the ad in the paper to read "**Free puppies. Five cute / one ugly.**" Lo and behold, all the puppies were adopted the next day by people coming to get the poor ugly puppy.

The couples' action is called counterintuitive thinking, which is defined as being contrary to intuition or common-sense expectation. For example, some might think it's counterintuitive (or crazy) to stand on the ledge of a concrete cliff like skate ramp and launch oneself off, yet it is now an Olympic sport. In **Golf** – you hit down on the ball to get it up, in **Sailing** you push the tiller in the opposite direction you want to go, and in **Skiing** one leans towards the downhill side of a turn. All these activities seem counterintuitive, but they work. The benefit of counterintuitive thinking is it can lead to new innovations, problem-solving, and personal growth.

Well guess what! We have a God who often works counterintuitive. If you don't believe me just read the **Sermon on the Mount** – Blessed the poor, the mourning, the meek, the hungry, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers,

the persecuted, the slandered, the falsely accused. **Say what!** How are all those descriptions blessed? They don't make sense. It seems counterintuitive to love our enemy, forgive those who sinned against us, to turn the other cheek, to suffer when we are trying to help another. Or as in the case of Abram and Sarai, to wait 25 years to have a baby.

The late comedian and centenarian **George Burns**, who lived to 100 years of age, once said, "**You know you're getting old when you stoop to tie your shoes and wonder what else you can do while you're down there.**"

Abram is thinking he and his wife aren't getting any younger, there is no baby on the way, and I need to make arrangements for the distribution of my goods when I pass on. In a vision he tells God, "**O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue to be childless, and the heir of my house in Eliezer of Damacus? You have given me no offspring, so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.**"

On the one hand Abram is complaining. God, you promised me a family, but all I have had is trouble. He's questioning God's integrity. On the other hand, Abram is doing the practical work of providing for his family's future by writing up his will. Just a sidenote, it was not uncommon for a childless couple to appoint a head slave, probably the head steward, as heir apparent. Abram is taking matters into our own hands. It just makes good practical sense.

But God said, "**No Abram, this man shall not be your heir, no one but your own issue shall be your heir.**" He brings him outside and said, "**Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. So shall the number of your descendants be.**"

-- Common sense told Abram that he and Sarai were not going to have any children. But God's promise said something else.

-- Common sense told Abram that he was a desert herdsman, not the father of a nation. But God's promise said something else.

-- Common sense told Abram that he should carefully save his valuable livestock as insurance against hard times. But God's promise said something else.

-- Common sense told Abram that the divine God of the universe couldn't be held accountable by any human-devised contractual agreement. But God's promise said something else.

-- Common sense told Abram that there was "no such thing as a free lunch" -- so he must be expected to pay for this land somehow. But God's promise said something else.

The commonsense faith of Abram was up against the counterintuitive promise of God and to his credit Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord reckoned it to him as right relationship.

II. NEW REALITY

Recently I watched a short film clip about 10 young women from different parts of the world. The first video showcased a woman from India named Ashwini. She grew up on a farm and lived a rather sheltered life. At the age of 15 her parents called her in to talk about an arranged marriage. It was common belief that a woman couldn't make a life on her own. Ashwini refused. A few years later she heard about a tech training program in the city. She enrolled but was scared to leave the only life she knew. But with hope and courage, she took a bus to the city. Because she didn't have enough money to stay long, she negotiated with the dean to allow her

to get her certificate in half the time. It was difficult but she did it. Ashwini got a job and bought a new cell phone. With new confidence, skills, and respect, Ashwini returned to the village and trained the teachers on how to use technology in the classroom. Her reality had changed.

And that is what God is doing throughout scripture. God is creating a new reality, a new opportunity for people to be delivered from what holds them in bondage, and to become the beautiful, complete and blessed creatures God made them to be in the first place. God was calling a people to himself. The amazing counterintuitive part of this, is God decides to do this through one family. **Now that's risky business.** The Lord summons Abram and Sarai to a new life in order that all humans might experience new life and rebirth in what Jesus called the Kingdom of God. What's interesting, is God desires a great nation not based on political power, but on blessing and grace, to a life in fellowship with himself.

That is what Abram and Sarai are called to believe in, that's the legacy their family will leave to the world, and the faith God asks them to fight for. God asks them to believe in a future they can't yet see, that they don't have a roadmap to, and that they could not possibly create all on their own. **Abram is wrestling with his faith.** He wants to choose the easy path, the practical path, the commonsense path. Faith is easy to say, and difficult to live out. Especially, when we have stumbled, lost to the same old sin, are afraid of the future, and go through difficult times. Sometimes it feels like we are all alone and wonder where are you God. Are you for real? Do you even care?

Abram cries out, **“O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess the land you promised?”** So God decides to give Abram a sign. Now I warn you it is

a weird sign. Abram is to take a cow, a goat, a ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon. He cuts the large animals in half, lays them together and sacrifices the two birds. I told you it is weird.

“Then 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...”

Even scholars don't know what to make of all this. They guess it was a ritual of the area for making treaties. In verse 18 the words **Make a Covenant** actually mean to **Cut a Covenant**. What's important is God clearly pledges himself to Abram and seals the promise with the sign of blood and sacrifice.

Recently, I was chatting with someone who asked, “Why did Jesus have to die on a **cross**?” Good question, after all, couldn't God forgive without a cross? The traditional answer is the Jesus died for our sins. While I agree, I think there is more to the story, than appeasing God's anger. Could it also be the Cross is the visible sign of God's grace, love, and promise of eternal life, sealed in blood and sacrifice of his only Son?

When our faith is being tested, when we wondering how we could hold on, and questioning God's promises we need to look up, not at the stars, but at the cross. It is the sign that God can do what God promises, that nothing can separate from the love of God, that death doesn't have the last word, that the joyous life eternal is ours, and God seeks to bless the world.

We have been given a sign of the beloved that God's future is open to all who trust in it. Abram believed faith trusted, so he was in right relationship with God, which only comes by faith in God. Even in the midst of the worst of our brokenness, God comes with an offer to come home, to receive forgiveness, healing and reconciliation, and then to walk again in faith. While we don't know what the future holds, what we do know is that God's constant promise to Abram and his descendants, including his spiritual offspring, is always in force: **"I will be with you."** Believe in the good news and hold on to faith. **Amen.**

First Presbyterian Church in Hawley

Sunday, March 16, 2025

Second Scripture Lesson

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

15 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."

²But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" ³And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." ⁴But 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." ⁵He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." ⁶And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

⁷Then he said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess." ⁸But he said, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" ⁹He 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." ¹⁰He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. ¹¹And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

¹²As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.

¹⁷When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. ¹⁸On 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.