

Grace, mercy & peace from God our Father & the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I often wonder what Abram must have envisioned when he first heard God speak to him in Ur of the Chaldeans:

“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” (Gen 12:1-3).

Let's face it, imagination is hardwired into the human psyche. Given a sufficiently vague set of promises – land, innumerable offspring, and God's favor – without a timeline, destination, or means of getting there, and person will fill in the blanks, whether we're intended to or not – whether such intentions were part of the promise or not.

So, when Abram and Sarai first heard those words, what sort of expectations regarding the LORD's promise began to populate their thoughts? Needless to say, the long, winding road – full of obstacles, hurdles, battles, enemies and trials – they end up taking wouldn't have been in even their wildest dreams.

Three chapters and about 10 years later, Abram finds himself living among the Oaks of Mamre with neither land, any obvious divine blessing, or any offspring – not even a single heir. ***It is certainly within my life experience – and perhaps yours too – to understand how Abram may begin to doubt that the future he hoped for may never come to pass.*** He begins to fear that his faith in life and in God's promise may not pan out. Abram and Sarai have wandered as a sojourners in a strange land; they've worked tirelessly; they've struggled and waited. But ***their longed for heir has not arrived.*** Hope begins to evaporate.

Are you familiar with the creeping sense of fear that a promised future will never arrive for you or a loved one? A growing sense that everything you've

built your hopes on may not be true? That next job will never be found; the recovery from illness will elude; that the world of opportunity you dream of for your children won't be there. In these irrational, paralyzing moments when it seems as though everything is poised to fall apart, fear and despair can make us want to give up.

The Lord recognizes Abram's fear, and seeks to reassure him.

"Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great."

When he hears the LORD making promises again, it's not at all surprising that Abram throws it back in God's face.

"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."

If we ever wonder whether or not the great patriarchs and matriarchs entertained grave doubt, here's our answer. Abram, seemingly, has had enough of the LORD's promises. Nothing is happening according to Abram and Sarai's timetable; none of their expectations of what would happen have come to be realized whatsoever.

In a characteristically divine way, God responds by telling Abram that those promises will be honored and realized, but not on Abram and Sarai's timetable. I can imagine that this does not completely reassure Abram. So, the LORD takes the promise a step further; God makes a covenant – *a legally binding contract*.

That's what's happening with all that bazaar sounding business about splitting animals in half. Long before the days of attorneys and written contracts, people still needed to make binding agreements. To do so, they would gather the community – the promise of being fed them meat would usually accomplish this; read out the terms of the agreement; and then undergo a ritual demonstrating that they would fulfill their part in the covenant on pain of death. *The split carcasses serve dual purposes*: the parties of the agreement would *ritually walk between the cleaved animals* saying that if

they failed to live up to their part, what happened to the animals would be their fate; secondly, after the ritual it was the *food for the community feast*. If this all sounds too fanciful read Jer. 34:188ff.

*All this is to say that **the Lord guarantees the promised future with God's own life itself.***

If God is so intent on fulfilling the Promise that the Lord swears an oath to do so, why will Abram and Sarah continue to live in doubt, struggle and fear for the rest of their lives? Because – truth be told – even after their child Isaac is born, Abraham and Sarah will never possess the Promised Land in their lifetimes. So, bunching us in with them, and the people of Israel, and the nations of Judah and Israel, and all their kings – **What exactly is the nature of the problem here? *Why do we fear the future?***

One thing is certain – the Lord will fulfill God's promised future to Abraham, even at the cost of God's life. *So why do we continue to live in doubt, struggle and fear for the rest of their lives?*

Who are we to set the terms of the promise? Look at what we do to everything we touch.

What does God promise to Abraham and to us through Jesus? *That we can have everything that we want?* **No!** But rather that we can be a part of God's vision of wholeness, God's promised future, not ours. When we submit ourselves to the living God's vision of life for the sake of one another and the world, the fear begins to evaporate. *When we begin to accept that we are not at the center of God's promised future* – that getting what I envision, how I envision it is neither the point or the destination of God's promise, *the confusion of how to proceed begins to fade.* Instead of charting my path, follow the path God sets out of all of us by living lives of love, mercy, gentleness and trust.

The reason life feels more desperate today than it ever has before is precisely because the only question facing anyone anymore in the digital age is: *"How do I fulfill my own unique destiny?"* It's a question that leads only to

fear, doubt, isolation, and despair because no one will share that vision with us. Young people ask themselves, What am I supposed to do with my life? It's the wrong question. It leads only to confusion, paralysis, and despair. The question with a future and hope is ***“Based on my unique gifts, qualities and abilities, how can I best serve God's better future for the world?”***

The same is true about congregations. ***If we focus our energy and effort on how we can fulfill our own unique vision and destiny here, we will live on a razor's edge in fear and weak resignation.***

Despite our insistence to do otherwise, God continues to invite us to live our lives as a way of fulfilling God's better future. That's what God does with the renewed commitment to Abram in Genesis 15. And I think it's what Jesus seems to be saying in Luke 13: *All these generations the prophets have called God's people back to the covenant of living with God into future, but they never listen, and instead kill God's messengers. Enough. I will come no more. You will not see God's promised kingdom until you come to me – and say, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.”*

God willingly fulfills the terms of that contract – ensuring that promised future even at the cost of God's life, ***and continues to invite us live into that kingdom*** by walking not our path, but Christ's.

As difficult as this life of living for God's promised vision and not our own is – and denying that we are the center of things requires constant struggle and diligence – it is still far easier than struggling to fulfill our own vision of the future, which we are powerless to do.

Seeking our own unique, individual vision of our destiny will bring each of us to our knees, to despair, to the grave. But when we submit ourselves to God's vision of the future, the wholeness of all in mercy, compassion, justice and peace we struggle together and move towards a common destination.

AMEN !!!