

Genesis 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.

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,

Panel #1

We all know the story of Father Abraham, right? And most of us have probably heard the song about Father Abraham and all his sons. But that's the rest of the story. Our Scripture reading today presents Father Abraham while he was still childless Abram, looking to God and wondering about God's promises. I want to search the scriptures with you this morning as we search for signs of God's care and promises fulfilled.

Remember at the beginning of Abram's story in Genesis, Abram is 75 years old, living in the prosperous land of Haran and God says Go! Leave your home, your land and extended family. Give up your security and everything. Abram took only his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot, some possessions and servants. And Abram went, knowing nothing of where he would end up. God gave him little clues along the way. He stopped in the land of Canaan, and God said, "This is where your offspring will live...one day...but it's not for you now...keep going." Abram paused long enough to build an altar and then it was time to "Go". Abram goes to Egypt to escape famine. There he is still in danger, and still not settled. Abram had not heard from God since God said that one day Abram's offspring would have land. Abram was not hearing much from God at all except, "Go". No sooner does he leave Egypt and separate from his nephew Lot because of scarce resources than he has to go and rescue Lot and his family from captivity and

warring kings. Because of his brave rescue and victory, the kings who were the enemies of Lot's captors wanted to make Abram rich. He could settle down and not worry about this promise of land that God has made to him for the future. His survival would no longer be a question. But, Abram turns these kings down and tells them that he can't take their gift because he has sworn an oath that he will only allow God to make him rich.

Panel #2

It is after these things that we meet Abram today in our scripture reading. Something is bothering Abraham. He has rejected the wealth and friendship of kings, and now he is alone, vulnerable, and fearful.

Abram thought he had a deal with God. Maybe it didn't occur to him how alone, vulnerable, and fearful he was in this arrangement with God until he was offered security by someone else. Maybe he's thinking, "I could have had security. Is God really going to hold up God's end of the deal in my life?" It's fair that he would think that way at this time. Let's be honest, Abraham is not really any better off at this point than he was when he first started journeying. He has dodged many bullets, and who is to say he is secure now? He has to be wondering how many more close calls he is going to have to endure, and how much he can endure. He's still living the life of nomad in a tent.

Abram thought he had a deal with God. Aren't we prone to thinking the same thing about our lives, that we have certain deals between us and the Lord? I will follow you God if only..... Sometimes we don't even recognize a deal we think we have with God until the thing we think owed to us is taken away. Maybe it happens with relationships that we thought were forever that end up falling apart. Or perhaps it has to do with some other life dream or goal, something we have been gearing towards our whole lives, when all of the sudden it is gone.

“Why did God let that happen to me?” Whenever it happens or however it happens, most people come to terms with that let down. But, we don't stop making deals with God.

Every one of us has things that make us feel safe and secure in life. And these things are not God. You can figure out what these things are for yourself by thinking about “When worst comes to worst at least...” When worst comes to worst at least, I'll have money in the bank, or at least I'll have my house, or at least I'll have the love of my spouse, or at least I'll have my parents or grandchildren to go to.” But, all of these things are vulnerable and when we lose or don't receive what is precious to us, we naturally say, “Hey, what happened to our plan God?”

Panel #3

Abraham is wondering ‘What happened to our plan God?’

After all that God has done, it sounds selfish or ungrateful. But believe it or not, God is ok with that question. Alone, Vulnerable, Afraid, Abraham is approached by God in a special way. God appears to Abraham in a vision. We read of many visions in the Bible. Vivid visions were one way that God spoke to the prophets and to other characters in the Bible. As important as Abram is in the history of our faith, this is the only time God appears to Abram in this particularly way. God is close to fearful, vulnerable Abram at this moment. First God says, “Don’t be afraid,” and then God says, “I am your shield.” It means, Abram, I will protect you. Then God says, “Your reward shall be very great.” Both God and Abram know the issue is security. Abram turned down security from the king. God is pleased by that; and so Abram will have a reward.

In Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, at the bottom of the pyramid are the very basic physiological needs, and right above those are the needs for safety and security. Safety and Security needs include: Personal security, Financial security, Health and well-being. When these needs are not met, when our security is in question, we may feel that God has not kept up God’s end of the bargain. But we learn from the Bible that it is ok to ask, “What happened to our plan, God?” After God tells Abram he will be rewarded, Abram does something for the first time. He talks back to God in frustration. He says in essence, your promise of reward doesn’t make any sense to me.

Abram doesn't have a son. From the time the Lord said, "Go" it was understood that God would make a great nation of Abram's descendants. Not only was that in question, but his very security was in question. In Abraham's day, not having an heir meant not having safety and security for the future. And since it doesn't look to Abram like he will have any descendants, he is about to name his servant his heir. This is a desperate move, because when he does that, he is admitting that this is the end of his lineage.

Aren't we often ready to make desperate moves in order to get what we need in order to have security? Think of sports figures who turn to steroids in order to maintain a competitive edge. Think of other moral or ethical compromises that individuals feel like they have to make in order to climb the corporate ladder. Or at an even more basic level, think of parents who turn to theft or other crimes in order to provide for their hungry children.

I think Abraham didn't really believe that struggling was going to be part of the deal when he first left the land of his ancestors. I think he is genuinely surprised that he doesn't have a son by now so that he can be secure.

Abram is having some serious doubts, but you see that is ok. God is gentle with Abram's doubts. "I don't see how I'll have even one heir....!....." It is just the two of them with no interruptions as God leads Abram out to look at the night sky as an illustration. "Look up at the night sky Abram." I don't think the

illustration could have been lost on Abram. After all God made all the stars he saw, I guess God could manage to give Abram a son.

But, God didn't just show Abram that he would have many descendants, he went further than that. Humans have never been very good at trusting each other, nor being trustworthy for that matter. Nowadays when we want to make an agreement, we sign legally binding contracts. The equivalent in Abram's time was the covenant, and entering into covenant was much more involved than a simple agreement. It was called "cutting a covenant". They would go and take an animal, cut it in half, then lay out the two pieces and both parties would walk between the two pieces of the animal. I know that sounds really cruel to us, but to them it meant sincerity. If one of the two parties broke the agreement, they agreed that they deserved to have the same fate done to them that was done to the animals.

So, God asked Abram to go and get 3 year old heifer, female goat, ram, turtledove, and pigeon. Abram cut the animals in half and laid them out. When the sun went down, God appeared as smoking firepot (cooking oven) and a flaming torch, and passed between the animal pieces. But, Abram did not walk between the animal pieces. Do you see what that means? No danger, retribution on Abram's head. The entire onus on the deal falls on the shoulders of God. By moving between the pieces, God is staking God's reputation on whether He

delivers this land to descendants of Abram. God is taking on the entire burden of the covenant.

We all know that struggling is part of our journey as God's children. Throughout the rest of the Abram story in Genesis, the gift of an heir and land encounters many obstacles. In our own journeys we also encounter many struggles and obstacles. But the message to Abram is still the message to us today, that God be trusted, when everything looks hopeless. God's trademark is the ability to produce life and hope out of seemingly impossible situations.

We've all made "deals" with God in some way or another. There are probably places where your life doesn't resemble the one you thought you were signing up for. But God invites us to talk back, to question, and to struggle. And in the end, we can rest assured that God is faithful. Things might not always go as we think they will, but we are always in God's care, just as Abram was so many years ago.