

When God Seems to Drag His Feet

Genesis 15:1

Our text this morning does not describe the first time God spoke to Abram, later to be known as Abraham. God first appeared to Abram while he still lived in a place called Ur of the Chaldeans:

¹The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.

² "I will make you into a great nation
and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.

³I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." - Genesis 12:1-3

Abram's obedient response to that call was our first glimpse of his faith. The trust required on that occasion is rightly celebrated. The man *was* 75-years old. He was established. Ur had been good to him, but without so much as a destination identified, God said, "Follow me," and Abram did not hesitate. It was an impressive display of faith, but I am not sure that it was as impressive as on other later occasions when he trusted God. After all, this call out of Ur was coupled with a promise of wealth, a nation and a legacy. This was an attractive offer to a man disappointed by the fact that he had no children. Besides, some men are just wired for new adventures.

Today, we are studying the second time God spoke to Abram. By now, the patriarch had waited several years for God's promises to come to pass. True, God had been good to him, but all this talk of a nation didn't seem to be going anywhere. So far, not even one child called Abram, "Daddy." He did not possess Canaan. He lived in a tent just like dozens of other tribal chiefs in the area.

When God appeared to Abram this time to reinforce and elaborate upon those earlier promises, I suspect believing was harder than it had been the first time. Then, Abram's response was all about the promise of adventure, power and reward. Now, Abram has secured the adventure but not the pay-off. What had once been vibrant expectations of God were now wounded disappointment and shattered dreams. So, God appeared to his weary pilgrim a second time:

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." - Genesis 15:1

Do you think waiting on God to move as we would like for Him to is any easier for us in this age of instant soup, instant oatmeal, instant rice and instant cash withdrawals from the ATM. Quirky comedian Steven Wright says: "I bought a microwave fireplace, and now I can spend a whole evening in front of the fire - in only 8 minutes." I suspect we all live more frenzied lives than did folks in Abram's day. If patiently waiting on the Lord was hard for him, it is maddening for us.

Of course, God will never be rushed by human impatience. His ways are higher than ours. His vantage point of the right timing is always perfect. Still, He knows that His people are prone to struggle in their faith so, from time to time, He finds ways to reinforce His promises to our minds. That, essentially, was Abraham's experience. He was shaken, and God spoke peace to his fears.

I. Confounded by God

A. Diminished by the Past

No sooner had Abram left Ur and arrived in Canaan than a famine sent him scrambling to Egypt for survival. Sarai, his wife, was a looker, and Abram feared that some Egyptian might knock him off just to take her as his own. So, he devised a scheme to pass Sarai off as his sister. She went to live in Pharaoh's harem, but the risk was always present that the king might take Sarai as a secondary wife. Abram didn't seem to be thinking that far ahead. He was mostly interested in saving his own skin. The LORD did care about Abram's integrity. He sent severe diseases on Pharaoh's household. When the truth surfaced, Pharaoh sent them both on their way.

God blessed Abram with silver, gold and large herds. His nephew, Lot, who had come from Ur with him, was also doing pretty well. The herdsmen of the two men began feuding over grazing pasture. This is when Abram took Lot to a high place and offered the younger man his choice of pastureland. Abram said, "If you go to this way, I'll go that way, and *vice versa*. Lot headed east toward the plains of Sodom and Gomorrah while Abram headed to Canaan. God continued to prosper Abraham and reaffirmed the promise that this land would one day be his.

Later, four kings from the north swept down upon the cities of the plains and, having defeated the cities, were returning home with prisoners and other spoils of war. This would have been no skin off Abram's nose were it not for the fact that one of these prisoners was his nephew Lot. Abram gathered the men in his caravan trained for battle and pursued the four kings. With a tiny force of 318 men and the cover of night, Abram routed the four kings and rescued his nephew along with the other captives and all their possessions. On the way home, Abram received a blessing from a mysterious priest of God named Melchizedek and gave him one-tenth of the spoils of the battle. However, Abram spurned any gestures of gratitude from the king of Sodom.

One might think that a man would be elated with such a victory, but that's not always the case. God had secured victory for Abram, but even when the LORD is on your side, who enjoys war? Who enjoys knowing that he now lives in a tent surrounded by enemies on every side? Perhaps, this is one reason God appeared to his weary patriarch and said, "Do not be afraid."

B. Disappointed in the Present

Regardless of how Abram viewed the past, it was the present that clearly had him frustrated, because when the LORD appeared to him and spoke words that should have brought instant joy to his heart, Abram felt a need to complain:

²But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" ³And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir." - Genesis 15:2, 3

Abram had amassed a fortune. God had protected him from his own lies in Egypt. He helped him win a battle he had no business winning. God had been good. Still, the fulfillment of the promise was nowhere in sight. There was no evidence that God was working to make Abram a nation, so, in the meantime, Abram had started working on a back-up plan.

In Mesopotamia, where Abram had once lived, a childless man sometimes adopted one of his servants so that the estate was not be up for grabs when the man died. God never actually told Abram that he would have a son. Abram supposed that the LORD could build a nation through Eliezer. He was a good fellow and a loyal servant. Whether or not Abram ever got around to adopting Eliezer, it seems he was mulling it over. Still, the grammar in the original Hebrew text makes it clear that Abram was crushed over the prospect of dying without a flesh and blood heir.

C. Doubtful of the Future

Even if Abram did pass everything he owned to Eliezer, that would only provide a legal heir. That was still a long way from being a great nation that possessed its own land. This matter was also weighing heavily on Abram's mind. Even after God reassured him that he would possess the land, he still had questions:

⁷He 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."

⁸But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?" - Genesis 15:7, 8

"Lord, I'm no king. Me and mine - we live in tents! There are many nations occupying this land and there many great cities. To date, I have not run across one called Abramville, and LORD, we both know that I've walked every square inch of this land." Abram had observed not so much as a single hint that he would ever occupy Canaan in any permanent way, much less run the place.

A new homeowner called the gas company to send someone out to light the pilots and adjust the furnace. He said he would need to be there, or the serviceman would never get the furnace properly adjusted. The company insisted that their well-trained staff would have no problems. "No," the owner said, "your man will never figure it out. The thermostat in the entry hall is a dummy. It's there for my wife to play with. Only I know where the real one is hidden."

Do you ever feel like no matter how much you tinker, you're never really in control? That no matter how thoroughly you lay out a plan and work it, you're not in charge? When battling with cancer, former NBC news anchor John Chancellor, said in an interview: "If you want to make God laugh, tell God your plans." That's where Abram was at this point in his pilgrimage with God. He truly did not know to what degree the fulfillment of God's will was in his own hands, so he was preparing to turn his estate over to a servant. That may have been a good plan for a man simply wanting to keep an estate intact. It was not God's plan for forging a nation.

II. Comforted by God

A. A Specific Assurance

The LORD spoke to Abram's strategy of leaving everything he owned to Eliezer:

⁴Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." - Genesis 15:4

Then, the LORD said to Abram, "Let's take this outside." There, He had Abram look up into the sky to count the stars. I suspect God prepared a particularly clear evening for the occasion. Knowing Abram could never number the stars, God said: "So shall your offspring be" (Genesis 15:5).

The very next verse would become a central argument in the New Testament for the Apostle Paul's teaching about salvation by faith rather than by works of the Law. But, in its original context, it appears discreetly and refers specifically to Abram becoming convinced that God's plan to build a nation was true and that it would begin with a child from his own body:

⁶Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness. - Genesis 15:6

Abram was asking so many questions of God at this point that it is almost as if the author inserted this verse so as to *remind* us that Abram really was a man of faith. What a vivid demonstration this is that God's perfect favor toward a man is not contingent on his perfect behavior. Abram would still have a tendency to try to chart the fulfillment of God's promises.

Sarai was too old to conceive a child, so his next Plan B would be to father a child by one of Sarai's maidservants. This arrangement was sanctioned by the pagan culture around him, but it was still a running ahead of God. The child God had in mind would be a true miracle. Isaac, born to Sarai of herself, would continue the hope of the nation first promised to Abram.

The fact that Abram had a penchant for hair-brained schemes like passing his wife off as his sister or like having a son by a servant was not enough to disqualify him from God's favor. Neither was the fact that he was not above lying, scheming, doubting or whining. God gave him credit for being a good man, not because he always *was* good, but because he usually responded to God in the wisest fashion a man can respond. Abram believed God, and not just according to some profession of belief. He believed God enough to stake his future on Him in obedient trust.

B. A Striking Covenant

Next, the LORD made it clear to Abram that the realization of a "great nation" would not occur in his lifetime. He would die in peace, but his descendants would spend 400 years as captives in a foreign land. After their release, they would occupy Canaan in a very real and complete sense.

Abram believed, but God, in His kindness, provided a vivid image, the memory of which would encourage the patriarch any time his faith might waver. The LORD commanded Abram to prepare for a ritual that resembled a typical covenant ceremony in the lands from which he had sojourned. An animal was cut in two, and the two parties of the covenant would walk together between the severed parts as if to say, "May whoever breaks this agreement be treated as this animal." This ceremony would differ in several details. Abram used five animals. A heifer, a goat and a ram were cut in half. A dove and a young pigeon were utilized intact. After everything was arranged, God, in the form of fire and smoke, passed among the animals by Himself.

It all seems very weird to modern eyes and ears. The points of the various details involved in this ceremony are cloudy, but the fact that only God passed among the animals seems obviously significant to me. Abram was no equal in this covenant. This was God's promise to Abram and the fulfillment of the promise would not fail just because Abram was prone to fail.

III. Contented by God

A. We Tend to Look for Joy in God's Gifts

It would be at least fourteen more years before this man, by then known as Abraham, would hold his infant son Isaac in his arms. But, he believed God in the present, and that was enough to alleviate his fears. There is a joy that comes from knowing that God counts us as being right with Himself. That joy should not be contingent on our being the beneficiaries of specific gifts or on knowing His timetable or of being able to track the twists and turns of His will.

"God's saints are prone to seek their happiness in God's gifts rather than in the Giver. Here they are recalled along with Abram to the sublime thought that God Himself is His people's best reward and that the possession and enjoyment of His friendship should abundantly compensate for the absence of creature comforts however dearly prized and ardently desired." - Thomas Whitelaw

James also references the fact that Abraham was regarded as righteous for His faith, but he also records, by the Holy Spirit, one other dimension of the relationship that we all need to hear:

"... Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. – James 2:23

B. We Tend to Look for Meaning in Our Expectations of God

God's word says: "faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" (Hebrews 11:1). Regarding the faith of Abraham and others like him, that same chapter adds:

¹³All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. – Hebrews 11:13

If we believe God's Word, then the essence of rebellion against the very nature of faith is to demand that God behave in a certain way right here and right now. "Speak to me, Lord, now." "Give me a sign." "Make me prosperous, now." "Heal this disease, now, or I will doubt You." "Bless this labor, now!" Any demand for any direct encounter with God that does not permit Him to work out things according to His perfect wisdom and timetable steps over the line of "faith in the unseen" and into the realm of careless presumption upon His sovereignty.

C. "I Am Your Shield and Very Great Reward"

This word translated "shield" is translated many ways throughout the Old Testament, many of them wonderful, for they speak of God's care for His people - our refuge, our tower of refuge, our rock; the shadow of the Almighty. God Himself is all the protection we need, not only against real enemies, but also against the doubts and fears that steal our joy. He is our "very great reward." The child Isaac was not Abram's reward. The promise of a nation was not Abram's reward. That neat pyrotechnic show where smoke and fire passed among those severed animal carcasses was not Abram's reward. Abram believed God and followed Him even when He did not know precisely what the fulfilled promises were supposed to look like.

What a valuable lesson to be learned for the modern believer and the modern church. There are many great and precious promises to be enjoyed, but God often keeps the precise nature of what those things will look like veiled from our sight, lest we become distracted and run after those things more than we run after Him. The greatest shield and the greatest of all rewards is not any one thing that God can do for us or provide to us. It is the fact that God is *with* us and *for* us.

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