

"Cross My Heart..."
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Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

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The story today from Genesis is about the early beginning of Father Abraham, when he was still just named Abram. The biblical picture of God and Abram's relationship is fairly straightforward. God speaks; Abram listens. God promises; Abram believes. God commands; Abram obeys. There comes a point, however, when Abram finally says, "Wait a minute. I have a question."

We might breathe a sigh of relief at this revelation. Abram the great model of faithfulness, is also a person who wants to know how God is going to fulfill God's promises. Abram looks at his life and says, "It is unclear to me, God, how you are going to work things out. There are some pretty big obstacles in the way. I'd like to have just a little more information."

Abram, at age 75, left his country and his father's house in response to God's command, "Go," and God's promise of blessing and prosperity. Abram went without asking any questions. As a nomadic family group, they were pushed out of the arid Negeb desert by famine, and Abram then went down to Egypt. He prospered there and left Egypt rich in cattle, silver and gold. Abram journeyed back to Bethel. Again God commanded and promised, telling Abram, "Walk through the land and I will give it to you." Abram responded obediently.

Today's scriptures from Genesis are composed of two parts: First, the conversation between God and Abram resulting in the promise first of a son and then of countless descendants and secondly another conversation, concluding in the promise of the land. At Abram's age, time is precious. He lives daily with the doubt and anxiety. For Abram to keep the faith, God must powerfully and directly reconfirm the divine covenant. Amazingly, God continues to be patient with him.

Then in verse 6, the text says "Abram trusted the Lord, and the Lord recognized Abram's high moral character." Abram seems prepared, in spite of lingering questions and contrary evidence, to take the next step forward, in confidence that God's promise will actually determine the course of his life. God declares Abram's willingness to live based on God's promise as righteous.

As Abram looks up at the night sky, what does he believe? That he will have a child? That God can be trusted? Ancestors as many as the stars? Can Abram completely understand how God will fulfill what God has promised? At the very least does Abram have the answer to his questions? If it was you, and God showed you a your potential future, filled with possibilities beyond your hopes and imaginings...could you just believe and live into it?

That seems as unlikely for us as for Abram. However, Abram does believe that God will be faithful and true. Abram believes that the life God promises to give him is the course he should try to follow. Abram believes but still asks questions. Immediately after God's judgement of Abram's faith a righteous, God declares, "I am the Lord, who brought you out of UR of the Chaldeans to give you this land as your to possession." What does Abram say? (Verse 8) "Lord God, how will I know that I actually possess it?"

Abram's faithfulness is a questioning faithlessness, a pleading with God for more: more information, more clarity, more courage, more commitment as we stumble along, trying to follow the steps God calls us to on our own journey of faith.

"Cross My heart and hope to die" The most binding oath of childhood; a solemn assurance of truthfulness, usually accompanied by motions of the right hand forming a cross over the heart; sometimes adding the left hand in the air.

When we are children we can promise anything. In fact at times we do. Yet, we are usually, at least when we are young, sincere about the promises we make. As we get older we begin to make agreements according to what we want to get out of it. Such as: "I promise to be good if I can have some candy..." Then we would even sign our names to almost any agreement or promise to get our greatest desire of the moment.

Remember all of the promises you made to get your driver's license: "I promise I will drive safe. I promise to follow all of the rules and laws set before me in order to drive safely. I promise to never go over the 55 MPH speed limit." Ya sure.

We are less likely to promise 'anything' as we get older. But when we do we give our promise with an assurance, the sealer of the deal: like a handshake, a signature or our word. They become a sign of Honor and intention to keep true to the promise.

This promise to Abram, found in Genesis, comes early in the scriptures. The story of the founder of the Hebrew nation - Abraham, goes for 16 chapters of the Bible. It is a long narrative, split in two after chapter 16 by the renaming of Abram at age 99, to Abraham, as he grew stronger in his trust of God. Today's part of the story, is in chapter 15, Abram is not there yet...

It is not about what God had done, but what God would do. But the trust is built as we in our humanity look back and know the promises have been kept. Chapter 15, verse six says Abram believed the Lord and the Lord counted that as sincere faith. Even so, in verse 8, Abram questioned how God could give possession of the land to him. God doesn't answer Abram directly, but with an act to seal the deal.

"Abram, how can I help you believe? What will it take?"

In the Old Testament, the term for making a covenant was literally 'cutting' a covenant. This was the act of committing ones-self to the solemn promise, by walking between the two halves of the animal and suggesting for yourself a fate similar to that of the halved animal if the promise was not fulfilled. "Cross my heart and hope to die."

God gave as assurance, a willingness in front of Abram, to go through a practice similar to the one by which men of that day used to seal their human bargains. God was letting him know that nothing could stand in the way of fulfillment of God's promises, for God's own Divine honor was at stake; the physical act, a human sign; a tangible, physical presence that God was willing to come to Abram's level of understanding, for Abram's sake, to help Abram believe.

This is not a covenant. A covenant is a promise from both sides. This is only God making the promise, but expecting a response. Abram isn't committed, yet by this act he knows he can trust in God's promise. Abram's doubt is replaced by his acceptance. God knew then and knows now that we as humans, have a hard time keeping covenants. In fact as humans we aren't able keep a covenant.

"Cross my heart and hope to die."

A group of children were given some of these old sayings – sayings they have said more than once themselves – and invited to draw a picture of how they envisioned the words. This drawing shows a head with a body, no

hands or feet, but a heart with a cross on it. The speech bubble above the head says "I've crossed my heart now what do I do?" A similar head and body replies with this response: "Now you hope to die."

News flash: death is a given for all of us, but it isn't meant to be on our timetable. What does that say of God's creation, when we say if I can't keep my promise, 'strike me dead right now.' Especially when we have a difficult time keeping all of the promises we make?

"Breaking covenants or promises may not kill us, but cleave our heart like the split of the animals. In the pain of regret and repentance, in the desire to fix what we now have broken, Jesus comes to bind our heart. God, letting us know that nothing can stand in the way of fulfillment of God's promises, for God's own Divine honor, known to us in Christ is at stake.

Once again, a tangible, physical presence that God is willing to come to our level of understanding, for our sake. It isn't just a one sided promise any more. We can keep our side of the bargain, not by offering our life, because Christ already did that for us. And because he did, it can now be a true covenant. Jesus can fill the cracks we make in the covenant.

I would like to believe that as we make promises, we are sincerely in the moment; that our intentions are pure. I believe the parents, the family and the church community at the Baptism, as they make their promises "to surround the child with a community of love and forgiveness, that they may grow in their service to others." Even so, I know that even when we do our best, we fall short of all that could be done.

Just as with a baptism, before a wedding, I take time to meet with the couple. I don't usually proclaim to a couple about to be wed, that the statistics show that 50% of marriages end in divorce. I can't know their futures, but instead, I try to see their hearts.

How many of us have experienced in ourselves or in others, 'wedding day jitters' as a moment of reality somehow slips past the state of 'in love' to fill us with doubt regarding the promise and covenant about to be sealed. It is difficult to make a solemn promise into a future we can't know.

God's promise precedes Abram's demand of proof. When Abram asks for a sign of reassurance, God has already acted faithfully. Abram is like the father of the demon possessed boy of Mark 9:24 who cries to Jesus, "I believe; help my unbelief."

Such a request is different from the distrustful demands that demonstrate disobedience. Centuries after Abram, in John 4:48, Jesus the Son of God complains of an unfaithful generation that demands signs and wonders. In Mark's story, the father's belief is enough to allow change in the boy, who is of course, healed.

Abram's doubt is replaced by his hard-fought acceptance. God kept God's promises to Abram, soon to be Abraham. That is acknowledgement of God's character. Jesus character is re-emphasized on the cross, as he defines faithfulness by the character of his own life and death.

Jesus came to remind us of the promises God has made to us: Eternal Life, but not in this body; Many blessings, but defined and timed by God not by us. Those are huge promises we can trust in, and there are many more.

Genesis tells us that Abram is finally convinced that the divine promise will be fulfilled, but he finds out more than he bargained for. Genesis depicts Abram fully understanding the promise, but also the struggle to come.

Abram and his descendants will be blessed. The blessings enable Abram and Saria to continue to bless their offspring, the community of the future.

Abram asks how God is going to accomplish what God promises. He does not whine and ask "When am I going to get what I want to be happy? When am I going to be satisfied? What do I have to do to feel content?"

Abram questions God's activity. His questioning faith takes seriously God's presence and power in his life and challenges us to be open to God's work in our lives. Abram questions God because he deeply believes God can do something about it. Such questions about God can also help us take the next step on our faith journey.

Perhaps if Abram had not questioned God, but merely kept covenant with God, he could have been spared the knowledge of what it was going to take to fulfill the covenant. As it was, Abram learned that God's promises required patient faith and steadfastness.

God comes to us ready to bless; our impatience does not change God. God comes to us hoping we will be trusting. Our positive response, though limited, echoes God's hopefulness. Trusting God and receiving divine blessings is our reward. If we can learn from Abram simply to trust God, then we do not need signs. We do not need to understand God's blessings fully in order to enjoy them. All we need are hopeful and patient hearts. The wise will accept those blessings gratefully.

Cross my heart...God knows the condition of your heart. The Holy Spirit will help you achieve the keeping of your promises if the promises are good and right. Putting Christ's stamp on it means you will do your best, knowing you will sometimes fail. Cross my heart doesn't need the 'hope to die' at the end, Christ already has done that for us.

Like our signature, our handshake, our Word of honor, as Christians we present all promises and seal all covenants with Christ's cross on our hearts. Like two stitches, that cross holds us together, even as we are breaking. Thank God for Jesus Christ, that assists us in keeping it all together...