

God-Kin
Genesis 15
Kimberley Morrison

This week we have both communion and a member meeting planned. So, I will try and limit this talk as much as possible to make room for those other very significant pieces of our life together as a community. We will not have a vocational dialogue this week, as we did last week with Patrick, but when we return from Family Camp we will take up that practice again.

Over the past weeks we have begun a sermon series called Thin Spaces: Encountering the Glory

Throughout history there have been thin spaces in this world where the distance between heaven and earth, between the Divine and the human, between the immortal and the mortal has become thin, and heaven comes close. Spaces where the glory of God has come near to an individual— and life has forever been altered. Specifically, we want to be reminded of how God's love comes to us and to fall in love again with God as he reveals himself to us in the pages of Holy Scripture.

Our purpose in this series is to go to ancient narratives and get a fresh look at the glory of God. It is our hope and prayer that as a community of God, in this place, we will find ourselves in such a place – a thin space where the glory comes close.

Let's Pray

When we engage with ancient narratives where God displays his love, he does so in culturally appropriate ways that seem very strange and mysterious and are therefore often lost on us as contemporary listeners or readers. However, I don't want us to miss what is going on in this Genesis 15 text - if we do so, we'll miss out on the glory and a glimpse of the face presence of God.

Let's reflect together, briefly, around this dialogue between Abraham and the Creator of the Universe. I am calling this talk God-Kin.

Background.

Abram was a well-established and wealthy man who lived with his kinfolk which included household employees in a place called Ur of the Chaldees. He would be similar to an Arab chieftain who rules a small tribe. We know that Abram had 318 trained men in his household who could go to war. So, with family members and untrained men he probably was chief, protector and political father to at least 1000 people.

God came to Abram and called him to follow him, much like Jesus called Peter and Andrew and James and John to follow him during Jesus' days on earth. They left everything and followed Jesus with a singular promise, *"Follow me and I will make you fishers of men."*

Abram receives this promise, *"Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. '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. I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'"*

Abram immediately follows God as the writer of Hebrews tells us, "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going" (Heb 11:8). It is important to note that Abram is called to leave his father's household. He now has no father offering him protection or inheritance of land. He only has the promise of a heretofore unknown God, a distant deity. Abram is 75 years old when he begins this new adventure!

God appears to Abram again in a place called Shechem. He tells him, *"to your offspring I will give this land."* So he builds an altar of remembrance.

As Abram traveled from place to place, he would build altars as both places where he worshiped and places of remembrance. In each place God came close.

Along this journey - Abram becomes wealthy. *“Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold”* (13:2).

God appears to Abram again and says *“Look around from where you are to the north and the south to the east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring would be counted. Go and walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you”* (13:14-18)

Abram had received an original promise from God and over the years Abram would enter a thin space where God would meet him and reassure him of the promise of land and offspring.

When we meet Abram in Gen 15 he has been journeying and waiting for God to fulfill the promise of an heir for around 10 years.

After all these years, Abram has grown discouraged and is having trouble sustaining hope and faith. He is anxious and perhaps to a degree overwhelmed. Proverbs tells us, *“Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life.”* Have you ever had hope deferred? Do you have dreams, desires, hopes, even expectations of God that have not been met? This causes dis-ease, sickness of the heart. What I am referencing here are not evil desires that are seemingly withheld from us but good desires, appropriate desires, good dreams, godly hopes - for a spouse, for a child, for a job, for a trustworthy friend, for restoration of love in your marriage, for a secure home, for enough income to meet your expenses, for healing in a relationship, for recovery from a disease, for your child who has deserted you to return, for education and training.

Abram has had hope deferred, a promise of God put on hold for over a decade - and it would seem that he has grown sick in his heart, he has grown anxious and worried, even fearful.

God sees Abram's anxiety and God comes close. We know Abram has grown anxious because of how God greets Abram.

God comes in a veiled form through a vision. And these are his first words to Abram “*fear not.*” This is the first time this literary formulation is used in Scripture. God is coming to speak to Abram in the midst of his anxieties and concerns.

What is the basis for Abram’s fear? God tells him, “I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.”

Abram hears these words but remains skeptical.

It would seem that after 10 years of following God around the backside of the wilderness, through thorny situations with world empires and small tribal groups who have been hostile, Abram is anxious - wrestling in his heart about God’s ability to fulfill his word. The desire of his heart seems far away and actually beyond his reach. He is now around 85 years old. It is physically impossible for the promise of God and his desire to be fulfilled.

We have talked about how God comes close when we create our own tent of meeting so to speak and take time to be with God in a habitual rhythm of waiting and listening to God. We have also talked about how God comes close in our regular rhythms of work and in the sorrowing contexts of our world.

Here we see God coming close in the midst of our anxieties and fears. God loves Abram - he sees him and knows him. God knows Abram’s ache for a child. God comes close and responds to this longing in such a tangible way.

God begins by giving Abram a verbal promise Gen 15:5

“And he brought him outside and said, *“Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”*

He then guarantees this promise by reminding him of who he is, he repeats his name, his identity to Abram and his powerful actions *“I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess”* Gen 15:7

Abram believes by faith, but he needs something more tangible. To overcome the skepticism of his mind, to meet his heart's ache, to provide a sense of surety to his soul Abram requests even more from God.

We often listen to this text from a human perspective. But listen to what Abram is asking. He's literally saying, you have given me your word and I believe you, you've given me your name the LORD - you are sovereign king, but I need something more, that is not enough for me. I need more from you.

Wow!

How does God respond? With anger — how dare you doubt my word? How dare you disdain my name?

No! God responds in gentleness, kindness and love. He comes close to Abram in his faith mixed with doubt and anxiety and fear.

In the New Testament we see the results of God coming close and reassuring Abram. "In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, "So shall your offspring be." 19 He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was "counted to him as righteousness" (Rom 4:18-22).

We often read this text and think it means that Abram never had moments of weakness, of doubt, of fear, of anxiety. When we read the Bible we may be tempted to make super heroes of ordinary people. Abram is considered the Father of faith not because of his perfect faith, but because when he encountered the doubts, the fears, the anxieties, the heart-sickness of deferred hope — God came close. The face Presence of God came near. Abram was a person like you and I. Hope deferred is painful and filled with sorrow. When we come together in this place today — we should know, know deeply the absolute freedom to be transparent about our struggles, our heartaches, our gut-level

ache over expectations lost, hopes dashed and dreams broken. This does not make us people without faith. This is simply the reality of people on a dangerous journey through a land of darkness and gloom with only enough light before us for the next step. This is simply a response that befits a person who lives in the time between the times, the time between the coming of Messiah and the final advent of our beautiful Savior. Of course, our faith is tenuous, of course we have weakness, of course we can feel anxious, dismayed, questioning and doubting along the journey. Perfect calm is not the sign of a mature person, perfect calm might be the sign of a person in denial, a person who has hardened their heart to the naturally occurring questions and doubts that erupt in our life journey. God meets us in our doubts, in our fears, in our questions. God comes close in those spaces where we are most likely to feel our deepest vulnerabilities and weaknesses.

The direction of Abram's life is consistently towards God but along the way he has experienced turbulent faith. Ten years of hope deferred on a direct promise from God. The journey from where you are right now that might be represented by "A" to our final dwelling place with God which might be represented by "B" is not a straight line for any person we meet in the biblical text. It is filled with static, ups and downs, turmoil and faith challenges, Jesus in Gethsemane is coming to God with questions and the deep burdens of a terrible calling. What matters in our faith journey is that we are still choosing to point our expectations and our vision towards God, even if that is only a sigh or a whispered prayer.

The New Testament tells us that Abram is fully convinced that God is able to do what he promised and this is counted to him as righteousness. Why is Abram able to hold on to his conviction that God will do what he promised, why is Abram able to hold on to faith? Because of the strength of his faith?

No - God comes close. We hold onto faith not because we have great faith but because God intervenes on our behalf. God sees us in our doubts and fears and God comes near, God pulls back the veil just a little and shows us himself.

Faith is a gift from God, that gift of faith comes through a means, that means is seeing the face of God, catching glimpses of God - in scripture, in creation, in the life of another person, in a vision, in a dream, in a word. God comes close.

God chooses a mode of responding to Abram in his fears on this occasion that is both culturally appropriate to Abram and also answers the great longing of his own heart. For in how God decides to respond we come to understand why he has delayed in giving Abram a child.

God chooses to make a covenant with Abram in an ancient treaty format that would have made complete sense to Abram.

The Hebrew term *berit*, or covenant, is “*an agreement enacted between two parties in which one or both make promises under oath to perform or refrain from certain actions stipulated in advance.*” Sandra Richter points out that the concept of covenant is important in Israelite society and the ancient Near East because the level of responsibility between people is determined by their blood relationship, with ultimate responsibility falling on the family’s patriarch.

And here we get to the heart of the delay in Abram becoming a father to the nation of Israel. God comes to Abram through means of a covenant ceremony to establish a bloodline type of relationship with Abram.

To establish a relationship between two unrelated parties in ancient times in the Middle East, one must *create* a familial relationship. Thus, “*on the individual, tribal and, eventually, national level, if you needed someone to act like a family member, and you were willing to give that person the privileges of family in return, you would invite that individual (tribe or nation) into a covenant agreement which created fictional kinship.*”

Sandra Richter

God has delayed giving a child to Abram and allowing Abram to become a father to his own child, because God wants Abram to first experience what it means to be kin with God.

Russ Meek helps us understand what is going on here: In order to bind two parties together, such as God and Abram, a covenant would be made whereby a kinship was created that was as strong as the bonds of a family. In modern society this idea is communicated most clearly in adoption and marriage. When two people become married, they create a family relationship—with all the attendant responsibilities—that previously did not exist. Likewise, when a family adopts a child, that child becomes as if she were physically born to the parents. Marriage and adoption join people as family members who were once not family members. Similarly, covenants in the ancient Near East made families out of those who were not family.

God is telling Abram - I am your Sovereign Lord, as you rightly name me, but I call you family. I am going to create a covenant relationship with you such that you can visibly and tangibly understand that we are family.

What an amazing gift of love. God comes close, God lifts the veil and Abram sees the beauty of a God so filled with love that he invites this desert chieftain to become family. He meets Abram right where he is at. He will use a culturally understandable ceremony in order for Abram to get it. This ceremony would be similar to a family signing on the dotted line to take legal responsibility for an adopted child.

We are so used to being called children of God that the absolutely radical nature of this covenant may be lost on us. In a world of warring tribal groups with constant warfare and strife between small tribal lords where land and power were always at the forefront, this treaty / covenant is outlandish. In the midst of what seemed to Abram a broken dream, a desire crushed, 10 years of hope deferred God responds by inviting Abram into the Divine community, into the community of love, to take Abram up out of being a desert rat and to make him a child of the God who calls galaxies into being.

Listen to this prayer written by someone who was in a similar situation to Abram's. This person is in a place of broken dreams and what seem like failed promises. This is a prayer for all of us who find ourselves in such a place today.

It is called "Liturgy for the Disappointed"

Oh Christ, in whom the final fulfillment of all hope is held and secure I bring to you now weathered fragments of my former dreams, the rent patches of hopes worn thin, the shards of some shattered image of life as I once thought it would be.

What I so wanted has not come to pass, I invested my hopes in desires that returned only sorrow and frustration. Those dreams, like glimmering farie feasts could not sustain me, and in my head, I know that you are sovereign even over this - over my tears, my confusion and my disappointment.

But I still feel, in this moment, as if I have been abandoned, as if you do not care that these hopes have collapsed to rubble. And yet I know this is not so. You are the sovereign of my sorrow. You apprehend a wider sweep with wiser eyes than mine. My history hears the fingerprints of grace. You were always faithful though I could not always trace quick evidence of your presence in my pain, yet did you remain at work, lurking in the wings, sifting all my splinterings for bright embers that might be breathed into more eternal dreams.

I have seen so often in retrospect how you had not neglected me, but had, with a master's care, flared my desire like silver in a crucible to burn away some lesser longing, and bring about your better vision. So let me remain tender now, to how you would teach me. My disappointments reveal so much about my own agenda for my life, and the ways I quietly demand that it should play out: free of conflict, free of pain, free of want. My dreams are so small. Your bigger purpose has always been for my greatest good, that I would day-to-day be fashioned into a more fit vessel for the indwelling of your Spirit and molded into a more compassionate ambassador of your coming Kingdom.

And you, in love, will use all means to shape my heart into those perfect forms. So, let this disappointment do its work. My truest hopes have never failed, they have merely been buried beneath the shoveled muck of disillusion, or encased in a carapace of self-serving desire. It is only false hopes that are brittle, shattering like shells on thin glass, to reveal the diamond hardness of the unshakeable eternal hopes within.

So shake and shatter all that hinder my growth, O God.

Unmask all false hopes, that my one true hope might shine out unclouded and undimmed. So let me be tutored by this new disappointment.

Let me listen to its holy whisper, that I may release at last these lesser dreams. That I might embrace the better dreams you dream for me and for your people, and for your kingdom and for your creation. Let me join myself to these, investing all hope in the one hope that will never come undone or betray those who place their trust in it.

Teach me to hope, O Lord, always and only in you. You are the King of my collapse. You answer not what I demand, but what I do not even know what to ask. Now take this dream, this husk, this chaff of my desire and give it back reformed and remade according to your better vision, or do not give it back at all.

Here in the ruins of my wrecked expectation, let me make this confession:

Not my dreams, O Lord, not my dreams, but yours be done. Amen

In the seeming loss of his dream to be a Father, Abram is given a true Father. God is forging in Abram's heart an understanding of what it means to be kin with God.

The strange ceremony we heard about in Gen 15 with animals cut in pieces and darkness and smoking pots is God re-enacting something historians refer to as the, "Suzerain Vassal Treaty." A Suzerain - is like a conquering warlord. A vassal is like a conquered person who now is in a relationship with that warlord. So a Suzerain Vassal Treaty is an agreement between a conqueror and a conquered person or tribe or people group.

God is using this covenant agreement ritual in order to become kin with Abram, to invite Abram to enter into God's tribe. Abram is very familiar with this covenant ritual and so he knew how it would all go down. As the conquering suzerain or sovereign, it would be expected that God would lay down the rules and regulations by which the subdued people, in this case Abram, must live. God may be offering kinship with the God of the universe, but there are ways that kin-folk must show their absolute loyalty.

To begin the ritual, Abram went and collected the symbols of the covenant agreement. He got the heifer, the goat, the ram, the dove and the pigeon. Abram brought these to God, cut them in two and laid the parts out on the ground, arranging the halves far enough apart so that a pathway was created between them where a person could walk. As the vassal in this covenant, Abram knew what would now be expected according to the rituals of covenants in the Middle East. A representative of the conquered people would walk between the butchered halves. Blood from the slaughtered animals would be flowing out onto the ground being walked upon. As you walked through the pathway between the butchered animals, you would physically be walking through blood. This “walking between” indicated agreement on the part of the vassal to comply with any imposed rules and regulations of the new sovereign. It became very clear to the conquered people group that failure to comply with the demands of the sovereign would result in their own blood flowing out onto the ground.

Now that the animals have been butchered and the pathway of blood was prepared, if God followed the pattern of the conquering tribes that surrounded Abram, He would have required that Abram walk that pathway. This would be the symbol of Abram’s submission to God and his understanding of the consequences of falling short of the expectations of God.

Listen again to the account of what happened on the day that God made His agreement with Abram, on the day that God visibly showed Abram that he was now kin with God.

“When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking pot and a flaming torch passed between the pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram.”

Who was it that walked between the pieces of bleeding flesh? It was God.

He carried a smoking pot and a blazing torch. Abram had collected the animals. Abram had slaughtered the animals. Abram would have been waiting for God to command him to walk between the pieces of the bodies. He would have anticipated being asked to walk through the blood. Walking through the blood would be analogous to us, in a

contemporary setting, signing the adoption contract. Night fell and God had not yet commanded Abram to walk the pathway of blood declaring his allegiance to God.

God had promised to bless Abram and to care for him. He had been told that he would have many offspring- they would even outnumber the stars of the sky. Abram would have expected these blessings to be contingent upon his own obedience. Abram would have thought that all the lost hopes, dashed dreams and disappointments of having no heir, no son would be dependent on his perfect loyalty to God. In walking through the blood, Abram would have been making this statement, "May I be like these slaughtered animals if I do not keep the terms of our agreement. If I fail to obey your commands, may you shed my blood, and take my life." Yet, it was God who walked through the blood. God made an irrevocable statement to Abram by so doing.

In this action, God said, "May I be like these slaughtered animals if you do not keep the terms of our agreement. If you fail to obey my commands, may my blood be shed in payment for your falling short".

Thousands of years later, on a cross in Palestine, God fulfilled the terms of this agreement. The folks he invited to be his kin had fallen short. They had missed the mark. They had overthrown His laws. They had stubbornly rebelled against their tribal Father and sovereign Lord. So, that great, promise-keeping Savior walked through the blood. He walked down dusty streets through the drops of blood dripping from his forehead where a crown of thorns had been cruelly shoved. He walked in clothing soaked by blood from the beatings and lashings he had unjustly received. And, finally, His blood poured down, as a Roman soldier tore his side with a cruel blade.

Our God is like none other. Even earthly sovereigns do not forgive broken treaties by fulfilling the treaty demands themselves. Our God was broken because we broke our treaty with Him.

Our God suffered so that he could call us kin, so he could call us sons and daughters.

Now we stand together and look, in a metaphorical way, upon the slaughtered Savior before us, his blood shed for us, his body broken for us and we think of all our broken

dreams and disappointments, our lost hopes and our desires in ruins and we bring them to Jesus.

As we stand before this table God comes close. He is not coming with broken dreams made better, or lost hopes restored or ruined desires remade.

As we stand before this table God comes close and whispers these words to all of us.

I have walked through the blood so that we could be kin.

My body was broken so that you might have life.

My blood was spilled so that we could be family.

Take a few moments now to confess to God the ways that you have fallen short of the beauty of this God, this God who walked through the pathway of blood for you. Tell him of all the ways that you have not loved as he loves.

If you are here today in the ruins of any wrecked expectations, I invite you to make this confession:

Not my dreams, O Lord, not my dreams, but yours be done. Amen

Hear the words of Paul as he reminds us of the symbols of the covenant we have with God. We do not have broken animal parts and a pathway of blood to walk through. Instead, we have emblems of the broken body of Jesus and we have emblems of the blood of Jesus - poured out for you and for me.

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

If you are a follower of Jesus and it is your desire to be kin with God, you are welcome to this table.

As you come to the table, see your Savior broken for you, walking the pathway of blood to sign and seal the covenant that guarantees your place in the family of God.

The gifts of God for the people of God, come to the feast.