

*Promises, Promise*

**A sermon preached by**  
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**Texts:**  
Luke 13:31-35  
Genesis 15: 1-12, 17-18

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### Genesis 15: 1-12, 17-18

[T]he 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."

**2** But Abram said, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" **3** And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." **4** But 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." **5** He 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." **6** And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

**7** Then he said to him, "I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess." **8** But he said, "O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" **9** He 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."

**10** He 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. **11** And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

**12** As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. **13** Then the Lord said to Abram, "Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years; **14** but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. **15** As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. **16** And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."

**17** When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. **18** On 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...

### Luke 13:31-35

[S]ome Pharisees came and said to [Jesus], "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." **32** He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. **33** Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.'

**34** Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! **35** See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.' "



“God, how do you want to express yourself through me in this congregation in this community at this time?”

I introduced that prayer in last week’s sermon. I first learned it from a church growth program I participated in a few years ago and I share it with you as an invitation to explore and imagine exactly who it is that God wants us to be as individuals, what God wants this congregation to be, and for us to simply be faithful to God’s call for us.

God has imagined something for this congregation. All we need do is search our imaginations for God’s imagination and we will be moving in the right direction – moving toward whatever God has set out for us.

Ever since I first heard it I have prayed that prayer with and for any congregation with which I have been connected. So I invite you to hear it and pray it as well – “God, how do you want to express yourself through *me* in *this* congregation in *this* community at *this* time?” It’s a very specific prayer – a context-centered prayer – focused on right now, right here, with these people. It’s a question that we need to be asking God and ourselves as we live out our lives from moment to moment. A prayer for guidance – “God, how do you want to express yourself through this congregation in this community at this time?” A personal question for each of us to ask ourselves – “How does God want to work through me in this community at this time?”

In Genesis 15, Abram receives God’s message in a vision – that Abram and his descendents would benefit from God’s promises. God promised land for the covenant people to live on. God promised offspring to Abram and Sarai. In this vision, God leads Abram outside his tent and has him look up – “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. So shall your descendents be.”

God’s promises. You shall be my children and I shall be your God. God’s covenant, not just with Abram and his children’s children but also with us all these thousands of years later. And it’s not a promise that is just about land and descendents. It is a promise about faith and stepping forward in that faith and in confidence and knowledge that God is leading us.

That’s a powerful promise that God makes. Down through the generations of faithful people, God has and will honor the covenant and asks that we honor it as well. “I will be with you; I will not fail or forsake you.”

That very same statement is for us as well. That is the promise of God which comes down through the years even to us living here at this moment in this place and all the communities from which

we come; God’s promise to us in ministry in and through this congregation. We do not need to be afraid of the future because the future is as it has been promised to us. The future will be filled for us just as it was filled for Abram with the promised land and descendents that number more than the stars in the heavens.

That’s a promise of growth, isn’t it? God is faithful. God will fill our little slice of heaven with stars – people – too numerous to count. Imagine having so many people trying to get into this Sanctuary that they don’t all fit! It can happen – because God is faithful to the promises made to the generations which came before us and God is faithful to we who are of the covenant and who try to live faithfully with God’s meaning for our lives.

“God, how do you want to express yourself through this congregation in this community at this time?”

God’s promise comes down to us through Abraham and Sarah, through Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah and Rachel, through Moses and Miriam and Aaron, through Joshua and the covenant people. God’s promise comes down to us through Jesus, who was for us the key to understanding God’s presence and purpose, Jesus who was one of the ways that God has chosen to be revealed to humanity.

In Luke’s Gospel this morning, Jesus chose yet another way for us to understand just how serious, how faithful, God is in the promises made. Jesus tell us that not only is God loving and kind and compassionate, not only is God forgiving and reliable and steadfast, but God is also a “gathering” God.

Jesus tells us of his desire to reach out and care for the people of Jerusalem – and it’s not a far stretch for us to consider that he is reaching out to the entire world – to gather them in. In all of his “God-ness” Jesus sees a need to bring everyone close to him, close to the God who is revealed through Jesus’ presence in this world.

Jesus reminds us that God will reach out and gather us in like a mother hen gathers in her chicks. It's a wonderful image – one of my favorites. God as a mother – a mother hen who stretches her wing and covers her children to protect them.

It's a feminine image which we too easily brush aside when we think about God and assign human attributes and pronouns to God. God is un-definable yet we, in our limited human comprehension, have devised concrete ways to imagine what and who God is. We think of God as "Father", we think of God as Omnipotent, we think of God as Almighty, we think of God as Forgiving and Judging but not Vengeful. But rarely do we think of God as a Mother, as a Nurturer, as a Gatherer. But here it is. If we are to believe scripture, then here is God in the feminine – God as Mother Hen, as a Nurturing Woman gathering in her children and protecting them from all danger.

It is an image which has had a deep impact on me. I am so much more comfortable with God as a mother who sweeps me into her comforting bosom than I am with imagining God in a masculine way. As God opens her wings we are pulled into the comfort and protection and compassion and nourishment that accompany that gathering. We are brought in close to the very nature of who and what God is. A mother's outstretched arms welcome the lost and vulnerable child.

Isn't that God's promise to us as Jesus passes it along? Isn't that a continuation of the promises that Abraham and Sarah and Moses and Aaron and Miriam received, the promises that drove them continually forward in a faithful response to what God gave them in the covenant?

We are a scattered people. We need to know that we have a God who is very willing to gather us in close even when we are so scattered. We're scattered physically – studies say that the average family today moves 5 times in a lifetime. Transportation,

communication, technology set us far physically from each other in a way that has never happened before. We're scattered when our schedules leave little room for us to truly encounter and relate to each other. We're emotionally scattered – the many forces in our lives pull us apart. Stress is such a common diagnosis these days – it saps our energy and pull us this way and that.

And we're scattered by our sin, also. Temptation comes to us in so many ways, pulling and prodding and pushing us so that we jeopardize our relationships with each other. We are tempted by the seduction of the world around us – we worship our cars, our houses, our stocks and bonds. We are told that we should care for ourselves first, "Look out for number one!"; "In the end, the one who has the most toys wins!"

And when we listen to those lies our relationships with each other and with God suffer. And that is the very definition of sin, when we fail to relate justly and lovingly to our friends and neighbors and enemies and selves. It's the reason on Ash Wednesday I asked people to put down on paper what it is that separates them from God or another person – because that separation is the sin which we need to turn over to God this Lenten season.

That sin is profound especially when we fail to fully relate to this God who has promised so much. All we need do is be willing to be faithful in our keeping of the covenant. That is what the promise of God is all about. God gathers us in even – or especially – when we are broken into a thousand pieces. The Good News that Jesus reveals is that God is not only loving and compassionate and forgiving and gracious. God is also a gathering God – a Mother God – who welcomes us and repairs us.

So, we pray, “God, how do you want to express yourself through this congregation in this community at this time?”

Is it possible that God is calling us to be a gathering people? We are to be like God and open our arms so that we can call in the broken and separated, the sinful and selfish, the lost and the least. Perhaps this congregation is being called to grow into a place which opens its doors like the wings of a mother hen – a Mother God – so that people in this community who are hurting can find a deepened relationship with God.

Any time anyone has been asked to describe this congregation – anyone I have heard from who is connected to this church in any way – anytime the question arises about what makes this congregation what it is today, church members invariably respond that it is a warm and welcoming place where someone can come through the door and find people willing to be open and accepting. If that is truly the reality, then we can use that to God’s advantage in this community. We should be able to use that strength as a tool to grow as a congregation – numerically and spiritually. If our welcome is sincere and as nourishing as a mother hen, then the work will be only a light burden as Jesus promised.

Imagine God’s imagination for this congregation as one which is living out God’s promises with open arms and embracing love. Imagine what this congregation will be if we can live out God’s promises to the fullest and gather in all who need to be comforted and cared for. That’s why we’re here – because we are embraced by God. We can use that gift, that promise, and live out God’s transforming power in this community at this time.

“God, how do you want to express yourself through this congregation in this community at this time?” By calling us to live out the promises faithfully and fully.

Amen.