

“Covenants and Contents”

We know of numerous ways to reassure others that *what* we say is true. “Cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye” was the failsafe assurance that some of us offered as children. Others of you have said, “Scout’s Honor” as you held up three fingers. A few perhaps will link your smallest fingers to another and say, “pinky swear?” In a courtroom, a person is asked to place their hand on a Bible and declare “to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.”

There was a time when a handshake was all that was necessary to guarantee a deal. A person’s integrity was measured by this statement, “You have my word,” and when that declaration was offered, there was no doubt. Some still live by that standard; may their tribe increase. The reason we need reassurance is because too often we have been that told something would happen and then it did not, or a person made a promise and failed to keep it.

Our Old Testament Lesson retells the account of the covenant with Abram where God promised a child to the childless, and then Abram needed to be reassured. At the heart of this covenant is God’s promise to *be* with Abram, to give him a son, and through that son descendants whose number would rival the number of stars in the sky.

The first section of Genesis 15 deals with the promise to Abram about plenty of descendants. God offered a word of assurance; Abram reacted with fear. The promise had been made to Abram, and now some time had passed. Because the unfulfilled promise still hung in the air, Abram had to be reassured; God told him, “Fear not.”

Abram countered, “But I continue childless.” When God first came to Abram, God did not offer a timetable of when a son would be born. God simply stated that he would be the father of a great nation. This pattern repeats itself through the Bible: God promises, and the people doubt. God speaks, and the people question.

But this pattern is not only confined to the written record of God’s revelation. We know that the promises of God are true; we enjoy singing “Standing on the Promises” realizing that our God will *never* fail and *never* fall. Yet when we find ourselves in a pinch, when anxiety rises, when pressure escalates, we forget. Too often, we choose fear over faith when we cannot see the future, when the outcome looks bleak, or when we can’t get a break. We become immersed with a game of “what ifs” and mentally travel to uninhabited lands of anxiousness to pitch our tent and wait out the storm.

I’ve wondered what makes us choose anxiety over reality, to look beyond what *is* to what possibly *could* go wrong. This phenomenon is more than an objective gaze at optimism vs. pessimism or half-full and half-empty kinds of people. That “worry gene,” which many have wondered if only Moms possess, is not exclusive to women who bear children. *Everyone* finds themselves at some juncture in their lives deciding whether we will *blindly* follow God without reservation, or place the advantages on one side of the scale and the disadvantages on the other side before we make the decision.

God promised Abram that he would have a son, that their future would be bright, and that he would be the father of a great nation with plenty of descendants. That promise first occurred in Genesis 12 (verses 2-3, 7); it happened again in Genesis 13 (verses 14-17). If God said it once and even twice, why did God have to remind Abram again? After all, we *revere* Abram as a man of great faith. Three religions, namely Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, claim him as a patriarch. Yet God had to continue to remind him of the covenant, which is essentially when one person vows to do something for someone else in the future. The covenant which God made to Abram was to *last*. Having descendants as plentiful as stars in the sky simply does not happen overnight; covenants are ongoing.

When I offer premarital counseling to couples which I marry, I ask them to agree or disagree

with this statement, “Marriage is a contract.” It’s somewhat of a trick question; *I* like to refer to marriage as a *covenant*. Contracts get broken, and the deal is off; people get *sued* for breach of contract. In marriage, we *will* make mistakes, but the relationship does not have to end as a result.

In a wedding ceremony, the couple vows to trust in times of misunderstanding, or to have and to hold for better or for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health. When an instance occurs when one party does not trust in times of misunderstanding, or one party does not act lovingly when times are worse, the couple can *remain* married; the relationship *remains*, because they made a covenant, rather than a contract. If this is the third time that Abram and God have had the conversation about the covenant, what does Abram fear the most? He is an old man without children, and God promised that his descendants would be as plentiful as stars in the milky way. Living in Hampton, I don’t see many stars; streetlights and illumined signs prevent me from seeing the thousands, maybe even millions of twinkles that shine above my roof each night. To a lesser extent, we had the same experience in Kenbridge; in town, we had streetlights, but few brightly illumined signs. But occasionally, we’d go to friends’ houses outside of town, out in the country, and have a bonfire.

Certainly you are familiar with this kind of scene; for those who have been to Eastover Retreat Center at night, you have seen a sky full of stars. Abram regularly viewed innumerable twinkles against the black evening canopy. To think that his descendants would be like those countless stars when he could not even have *one* child presented a problem. Abram had been trusting, had followed God’s directive to leave his home and go to a land which God would show him. But God had not delivered on the promise . . . yet. Since a period of time had passed, evidently enough time for the promise to have been manifested, Abram wondered.

What’s wrong with wanting reassurance? Last week, I preached about remembering and responding, the episode of the Children of Israel standing on the precipice of their Promised Land. While they were encouraged to recall the wondrous works of God, they were also encouraged to respond with thanksgiving in tangible ways.

While Abram could recall the covenant, he needed to be reminded that God had not forgotten. For Abram, his own “promised land” of fatherhood was ahead of him. God had definitively pledged that he would be the father of a great nation, yet Abram still found himself childless.

Many long for the future, where life will be different, yet find themselves stuck. Some high school students wonder *what* college will be like, *where* they will enroll, and *how* their lives will change. Some college students wonder what will life be like after graduation, after they leave the dependency of their parents and accept full responsibility of their finances. Some adults look toward that promised land of retirement and consider the benefits and advantages of having more “discretionary time.” Promised lands include a first child, home ownership, a first grandchild, a new job, financial security or windfall. While those “future ventures” may loom on the horizon, the reality of “the now” sometimes raises our anxiety. Obstacles cloud our view; barriers seem larger than they really are. Occasionally, we need to view the circumstances through a more realistic set of lenses: God has provided in our past, and God will provide again.

These stories from the Old Testament were told and retold to provide comfort and assurance to those who needed it. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob provided for the Children of Israel through their wilderness wanderings and finally into their Promised Land; this same God stands ready to lead into whatever glorious futures await us.

Where in your life do you need to hear God say, “Do not be afraid. I am your shield, your very great reward?” During the season of Lent, we inventory our lives and find that we haven’t arrived yet. The promised land of God’s grace remains available and is there for the taking as a free gift. Yet too many will hang onto the memory of an action, or the guilt of an inaction, allowing it to shackle you

into your own wilderness wandering. Like Abram, the barrenness of your past and present prevent you from receiving the joy which could easily spill over into a bright future which God has already planned. We have no *reason* to fear; if God helped Abram be the father of a great nation, whose descendants outnumbered the stars, then God can certainly handle any problem, enigma, or issue which plagues us. All that God desires is that we continue to trust, continue to believe, even when the demons of grief, self-pity, and doubt attack us. Abram had to continue to trust, even when *his* circumstances called that belief “foolish.”

In our text, the covenant was initiated by God; the reassurance was offered through the ritual involving the animals, which was an ancient practice. When Abram requested reassurance, God requested that Abram secure these animals for the ritual. The smoking fire pot, which was actually a cone-shaped oven, and the flaming torch passed between the animals. The *fire* of these two objects represented God’s *presence*; the lesson being offered was that God *would* keep the covenant. The action in this ancient ritual is akin to methods of reassurance I mentioned in the introduction. God’s covenantal promise would be fulfilled. The *covenant* was that through Abram, God would create a great nation. The *contents* of the covenant, meaning the byproducts of that great promise, were that God is in charge; God has promised to be with us; God is at work underneath everything.

In seeking to gain a *God*-perspective, we can hold fast to the promise given to Father Abraham, because *we* are his descendants too. No matter the circumstance, regardless of how impossible the reality may appear, if we listen closely, we can hear God say to us, “Do not be afraid. I am your shield. Your reward will be great.” God is good, all the time, and all God required of Abram is all that God requires of us. All God wants is for us to trust, because no matter what, God is in charge, God is with us; God is at work in everything, regardless of how the present circumstances appear. These contents of the covenant to Abram remain in effect to his descendants, because we serve the same God.

Let’s be thankful that God’s word is true; that God *is* in charge; that God *is* with us, and that God *is* at work in everything. Let’s also be grateful that because our God is so great, we can stand on these promises. AMEN.