

March 13, 2022
Second Sunday of Lent

Reading about God's covenant with Abram reminded me of the covenanting service we celebrated here last fall; the covenant between you, the Region, God, and me. And after reading the scripture I'm thrilled that nobody cut me in half as an offering or as a sign of the covenant.

This past week I heard a presentation on the topic of homelessness in London. Actually, it was more about homelessness in general than it was about the specifics of London. The presenter talked about the visible homeless, you know, the ones we trip over on the sidewalks in downtown London, and the invisible homeless. No, they aren't the children of the Invisible Man. The invisible homeless are the ones who are homeless but we don't see them on the streets. We don't see them because they are in shelters, or they are sofa-surfing, spending a few days with one friend after another, or they are incarcerated, or..... The statistic that blew me away, even though I've worked with the homeless in the past, was that for every homeless person you see, there are 20 who are invisible. So if you see 10 homeless people on the street corner, there are at least 200 more who are homeless but you don't see them. And none of this counts the people who are one paycheck, or one rent cycle away from being homeless – those at risk. Without a home, without roots, without a place where they belong, people feel as though they are disposable, as though they matter to nobody. Before I move on, one more statistic. Did you know that our various levels of government spend \$88,000 per year on programs and services for each homeless person? Did you know that it would cost the taxpayers \$24,000 per year to prevent each person from becoming homeless? So, in an election year, here's a good question to ask the municipal and provincial candidates – why are you wasting the taxpayer's money by keeping people homeless? Other jurisdictions have adopted a 'Housing First' policy to get the homeless housed, before they try and tackle addiction issues, mental health issues, and any other issues that need addressing before individuals become self-reliant, contributing members of society. Why not us in Ontario, or London?

While Abram and Sarai, wandering, homeless, rootless, nomadic Arameans, may have thought they mattered to nobody, they mattered to God. And God assured them of their worth to Him, a place where they belonged in God's creation. I will give you the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, God said to Abram when Abram was in Haran. Abram and Sarai are not young any more. We are not talking about a couple of virile young twenty-somethings. If I recall rightly,

Abram was about 76 years old in Haran, and Sarai was ten years younger, 66. The promise of a land of their own was worthless without heirs, descendants to occupy the land for generations to come. And, at their age, the promise of becoming a great nation, of having descendants seemed like utter foolishness. Abram had no problem letting God know how worthless he thought God's promises were. Abram snaps back at God; he has nothing to lose. "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." Indeed, the only baby in Abram's retinue is one born to a slave, Eliezer of Damascus. Following the practice of the time and surrounding culture, Abram could adopt the child as his own and make him heir, but he is not of Abram's seed.

We are a people who seek empirical proof of everything before we will believe it. Has anybody heard about the archaeological find that is alleged to be the tomb of Christ? What I want to know is, if he was resurrected, how can there be any remains? Or did he die again? In which case, the resurrection was actually only a resuscitation. Abram wants proof, solid proof, something he can see and hold and smell and hear. Abram wants proof that he will not only have a land, but heirs to inhabit it. And what does God do? Shows Abram the stars of the sky and promises Abram that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars. In other words, more words, more promises, no substance. And so, Abram pushes back against God again. "How am I to know that I will possess this land?" And God says, we'll mark the promise with a ritual. We will make a covenant with each other. Oh! That makes it all better. Write up a contract and sign it. Like, nobody has ever broken a contract before....

But God wasn't talking about making a contract. God was talking about something beyond a contract. God used the word covenant, and covenants are a special kind of promise. They are sacred promises that bring about relationships of commitment between parties, as at a wedding, or between people and God.

The scripture says that Abram believed God, and God reckoned it to him as righteousness. Righteousness does not mean that someone is morally upright, or in younger generations, morally uptight. That is not what is meant here. Righteousness is nothing more than believing and trusting in God's promises. Abram's righteousness is trusting in God's future for him, and then living according to that promise. Righteousness means to give up any and all control over the present in order to live according to God's promises. That means not only letting go of control of the present but also of dreaming up our own ideas and plans for the future. It means trusting wholly in God's future plans and living accordingly.

And what of our covenant – the one between you, the region, God, and me? Covenants are sacred promises that bring about relationships of commitment, but they are also promises of new life. Abram was promised a new life in a new land, and descendants that would grow to be a mighty nation in generations to come. I believe that God would not have called us into this committed relationship if new life wasn't part of God's plan. So what is the God's plan for new life in this place? Can we discern it?

Lent is a journey. Not a physical journey, but a spiritual one. So here's the journey. Can God's promises be trusted? Well, in due course, Abram became the father of Ishmael, by Hagar, Isaac by Sarah, and Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah by Keturah, the wife he took after Sarah died at the age of 127. When Abram was still childless, God made a covenant with Abram, a solemn pledge that Abram would be the father of a vast multitude. In fact, four hundred and some odd years later, the Israelites are supposed to have become a people numbering in the hundreds of thousands (Ex 12:37) In 2022, Jews and Christians reckon Abraham as their father, through his son Isaac, and Muslims reckon Abraham as their father, through his son Ishmael, and that says nothing of the descendants of his children by Keturah. The covenant, the solemn promise that God made with Abram continues to this day. God did give Abram both an heir and the land. Can we trust God? What do we insist in having control over, that we need to relinquish control of? Can we let go of that control and accept God's promises? And now for the tough part, can we live according to God's plan? Can we live in the face of all the pain, the frustration, the injustice, the violence, the misery of this world as though God's promises are true? If and only if we can, will we discover God's blessings for us, as Abram discovered God's blessings for him. May it be so.