

June 23

The Gap Between What God Says and What you See

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

Today we continue looking at Abram's life as we explore something we all deal with in our lives, the gap between a promise and its fulfillment, between plans made and their realization, or information given and the consequences of those facts. Last week we learned that God had called Abram to leave family and go to a place that God would show him. Upon arriving in Cana, he is reminded that God would bless his faithfulness and make of him a great nation. Some time has passed in Abram's life when the word of the Lord comes to Abram anew. It is here our scripture reading picks up the story. God tells Abram not to be afraid because God is with him. Abram, instead of rejoicing at this word of comfort, becomes angry with God. "You have given me no offspring! All my belongings will go to a slave!" God does not chastise him for his anger but instead restates the promise saying a child of his will inherit and from that child will come a great nation more numerous than the stars. And here is a key verse, "And Abram believed the Lord and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness." That verse is quoted in the New Testament in Hebrews as a reminder to Christians concerning what it means to live with faith. This passage ends with a covenant service. It is unique in that God asks nothing more from Abram; his statement of faith seems to be enough. God, for the only time in scripture, makes solemn commitments that are binding towards Abram and his descendants.

Abram was living in the gap. He was living between what God promised and the fulfillment of those promises. We have all been there. Living in the gap between where you are and where you would like to be or where you believe God is calling you to be. We live in the gap between plans made and they finally coming about. We live in the gap between diagnosis and a clear understanding of what it means for us or a loved one. We live in the gap between decisions made and their outcome. As a denomination we are living in such a gap. We spent most of our time at annual conference discussing how the punitive legislation passed at our specially called general conference might affect us in the west. Those restrictive rules do not come on line until January 1. So we are living in the unknown, a gap time. You can probably think of other gap times. To live in the gap is hard. Gaps occur whenever we are in times of transition.

Often, just like Abram, we are so focused on where we want to go that we do not always celebrate where we are. We might experience disappointment instead of being aware that God is at work in those gap times. We become angry with life, sometimes with God, and with anyone or anything else that seems to get in the way of our moving forward. We, like Abram, want resolution and instead we hear promises that seem unrealistic and we are left wandering around being told to trust and be patient. We know those gap-type moments and we don't like them.

Because they are so much a part of life we can also appreciate Abram's feelings of anger. He was in the land God had told him to go to. He had been reassured that God was with him and there was nothing to be afraid of. His flocks were growing in size. There was much to rejoice in. Abram instead focused on what was lacking. Does that sound familiar to you?

I can think of several times where I was living in a gap time and focused on the stuff that was unresolved instead of celebrating the good that was occurring. I recall when I was asked to host the annual conference, our regional meeting of churches and pastors. Many times I would come home from planning meetings frustrated that this and that had not been done. I was intently focused on the lack, afraid I would be blamed, or worse that I would have to pick up the ball. Then I would receive minutes from the secretary. They were so positive, listing all that had been accomplished, reminding people of the work they had volunteered to do, showering praise on their willingness to take on those jobs and more. I sometimes wondered if I were at the same meeting as the secretary. But then I realized that progress was happening, the conference would take place, and relaxed a bit. But it is so easy to focus on what is going wrong instead of what is going right.

Part of what God wanted Abram to do is to trust that the place he was in was exactly where he needed to be. Abram saw unfulfilled promises: he had no heir, he was a nomad, and owned no land. God told him not to worry, everything was just like it was supposed to be. The promises would be fulfilled. He was asked to believe that this is where you need to be at this moment in your life. Abram believed and it was considered righteousness.

When you are in a gap time how do you respond to the idea that you are exactly where God wants you to be? Is this a source of comfort and hope or are you skeptical, discouraged, or despairing? Does it make you angry? It is hard to see God at work when you are feeling stuck, or feel that you are spinning your wheels, or just need answers that seem long in coming. It takes a lot of work to find peace at such a time.

We wish the story would end there with Abram faithfully following God. Instead we have him becoming impatient and taking matters into his own hands and this creates a mess. When no heir was forthcoming Sarai, as was the custom, gave him Hagar, her slave, as a second wife. From this union he had Ishmael. This created jealousy as Hagar reminded Sarai often that she had produced a male heir. Later after Sarai had Isaac there is even more jealousy until Hagar is banished. All could have been avoided.

Where does waiting cause impatience in us today? You can think of lots of examples. Waiting in a long line at the store realizing you had picked the wrong checker. Waiting for a doctor's appointment. Waiting at a stop sign for traffic to go by. Instead of feeling impatient perhaps we can see these as a reminder that God looks at timing differently than we do. Abram was looking at life from his limited perspective and things were all out of kilter. He had trusted God and left the security of home, and now everything seemingly was wrong. God instead shows him the sky and says trust, everything will work out. Abram is not promised that he will see all of the results. In fact, in a part of the scripture that we did not read, he was told that it would be 400 years before his heirs inherited this land! That is taking a really long view of life.

We seem to be wired to be result oriented. God instead asks us to trust and go forth on the journey and celebrate what is happening, even if we are waiting for something yet to occur. When we only focus on the future, we begin to miss the joys of the present.

I think of a recent visit I had with one of you who is dealing with significant health issues. The future is very uncertain. She told me her goal is to not worry about all the questions tomorrow might bring, but to instead focus on the good that is happening now. She realized that ultimately she could do nothing about the future. It will be what it

will be. But she understands that she has all sorts of power over how to live today. She is choosing to do so with a positive and trust-filled attitude.

We don't like the gaps but they occur. We are called to go forward in trust, not knowing the answer, with the awareness that God is with us on the journey. Faithfulness is not just believing that the promises of God will happen sometime. Faithfulness is celebrating how God is with you today and, trusting that even if you are in a place you do not choose to be, that this might be exactly where you need to be at this moment. Faithfulness is asking what must I do today and what must I leave alone. Faithfulness is celebrating that God is at work in this moment even when it doesn't feel that way.

The promises of God are real. We can count on them. But the timing of God, the vision of God is different from our own which is so limited. So we trust, we walk forward in hope, celebrating what is happening now and when we do this, it will be called righteous.