

First Presbyterian Church
Genesis 15:1-7, Rom. 4:1-3, “The Story of God: Covenant”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 1/23/2022

Good morning. We are now opening chapter 3 in our series entitled,
“The Story of God.” We learned in chapter 1
that the original purpose of creation was to exist
in mutual blessing.

In that mutual blessing, humans served as the caretakers of creation.
Last week we saw that things fell apart in chapter 2
because humanity attempted to break away from
that interdependent world God had created.

Adam and Eve sought to overtake God’s role
as the only one who can determine good from evil.
Both Adam and Eve believed the temptation of the
serpent, and they ate the fruit
of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The result was division between men and women,
division between humans and the earth,
and division between humanity and God
which is symbolized in being cast out of the garden.

You see, the Garden of Eden was both a place and a state of being,
the ultimate form of right relationship with God.
Another word that describes right relationship
is *righteousness* which we encounter in today’s passage.

As the story of God continues,
the question is raised whether that relationship would ever be restored.

Cain kills Abel, and sin creates problems in societies all over the world.
Every aspect of the good world that was once the Garden of Eden
is now touched by the impact of sin.

We learn that God chooses Noah and hits the restart button
by flooding the world, but then even the descendants of Noah
can’t shake the sin principle that was started by Adam and Eve.
These descendants get together to build a huge skyscraper
that they think will put them near to God
and allow them to make a name for themselves.

So God scatters the people and confuses their languages.
And in that act a curse falls upon the nations.

After Noah, we saw humanity's disarray, but also their creativity and drive,
their search for answers within themselves.

They sought to make a name for themselves
and to be close to God,
but they sought to do it on their own terms
and God scattered them.

It's legitimate to wonder how humanity was supposed
to get out of this mess.

As I said before, the Garden of Eden was both a place
and a way of relationship with God.

Can we ever get that back?

In the chapter of God's story that we open up today,
we find that the answer is, "Yes."
God's grace is at work in the Old Testament.

So how does God do this? By choosing one family,
the family of a guy who was probably a moon worshiper
from a land we now know as Iraq.

This moon worshiper from Iraq was named Abram
and his wife was named Sarai.

This is a very odd thing for God to do.

If I was God I'd zap everybody with a mini bolt of lightning
to get their attention and then I'd say,
"Hey! I'm God—get it? You can't do this on your own, you need me.
So here's a book of rules for you to follow
that will help us be honest with each other
and you can depend on me alone just like it was before."

That's what I would do. But God's smarter than me.

And a better storyteller, too. So God just gets one person's attention.

Abram the moon worshiper.

And he tells him to leave his family and his homeland,
and to go to the place that he will show him.

God established this covenant with Abram over many decades.

The process began when God made promises to Abram in Genesis 12:1-3.
God will make Abram into a Great Nation and bless him.
God will also make his name great and he will be a blessing.
In fact, all families on earth will be blessed through him.

In a world marked by division,
Abram is to be an agent of blessing and integration,
and that will be the marker of his divinely granted character.

But then, decades later, in Gen. 15,
God comes back for another conversation with Abram.

All these years later, Abram and Sarai still don't have any children.
But God takes Abram outside and says,
"Look up at the milky way – how many thousands of thousands of stars
can you count? So shall your offspring be."

Then comes v. 6, "**Abram believed God,
and it was credited to him as ... righteousness.**"
That is to say ... right relatedness.

There is a restoration of relationship here between God
and humanity that comes not through doing things
for God, but by believing what God says
– through faith!

This is why the Apostle Paul quotes this very verse in his letter to the church
in Rome when discussing the primacy of faith over works.

Paul wants to demonstrate through Abraham's example
that salvation isn't a reward from God for doing good things,
but rather a gift from God
on the basis of faith alone.

Where Adam and Eve failed to believe God,
Abraham and Sarah (who were by no means perfect) chose faith.
This is where we see God drawing lines for us back
to the Garden of Eden,
back to the place of right relationship and blessing.

Through the promise of God and Abram's faith response to God
we have a revived heartbeat in the relationship between
creator and creation.

And just like relationship was connected to place
in the Garden of Eden,
so relationship is connected to place
in Gen. 15.

v. 7, **"I am YHWH, who brought you out of Ur to give you this land
to take possession of it."**

Humans know who they are and who they belong to
by the place they are from.

But still Abram wonders in v. 8,
"How can I know?"

God's answer to that question is to establish a covenant.

God directs Abram to split a number of animals in half.

Scholars say that when this ancient practice was done,
the party making a covenant would walk between
the animal halves so as to say,

"If I break our relationship agreement, I will be split like these animals."

Abram falls asleep in v. 12, and God reveals the future
difficulties of Abram's offspring, including 400 years of slavery.

But, God says, they will eventually come back
to the land God has promised.

Then a smoking pot and blazing torch
(perhaps prefiguring the pillar of flame and smoke
from the Exodus story)
move between the halves of the animals,
and the Lord made a covenant with Abram to give his descendants this land.

Then in chapter 17 and 23 years later,
God comes again to Abram and institutes
the covenant of circumcision so that both God and Abram's
descendants were active partners in the covenant.

When you take all this together,
we see that long after sin entered the world,
God is revealed to be a gracious, committed, loving person
who is active and engaged in relationship with creation.
God won't just swoop in and make everything better,
but is willing to put God's own self on the line
in pursuing these beloved, wayward people.
(By the way -- does that sound a lot like Jesus to you?)

And humanity, as God's representatives on earth, made in the image of God,
haven't lost their way entirely.
Abram and Sarai have recognized that self-serving ambition
will bring destruction and confusion into the world.

They listen for God's voice, fight through times of unbelief,
and are willing to commit themselves to trusting God's vision
for the world.

And so it is that after the wondrous beauty of creation,
and the terrifying danger of the fall,
comes this third essential moment in the Story of God:
a covenanted commitment to find a way forward together.