

## **Lent 2 C 2022**

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

March 13, 2022

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

“The Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.” That’s the most famous part of today’s first reading. “[Abraham] believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.” That line gets quoted by Paul twice in the New Testament. Once in Romans. Once in Galatians. Faith is reckoned as righteousness. The righteous live by faith. This important concept once triggered a Reformation in the Christian Church. On the first Sunday in August this summer, the first six verses of our first reading will again be read. God shows Abraham the stars, and promises him that his offspring will be numerous, as unlikely as that sounds. And Abraham believes God’s word, and God reckons it as righteousness. God credits Abraham in a special way due to Abraham’s trust.

That’s all in the first six verses of our first reading, the fifteenth chapter of Genesis. And that’s where the reading will end when it pops up again this August. But today, in the season of Lent, additional verses are included. In addition to the promise of offspring and descendants, God promises the land. And then something unusual happens, and the first time you read this, it appears to be animal sacrifice. That’s not what it is, but it appears to be that way. A heifer, a female goat, a ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon. These are the kinds of animals that are often utilized for animal sacrifice in the Old Testament. And there’s a reference to smoke and fire, and so it vaguely seems like one of those peculiar Old Testament rituals of animal sacrifice. People in Genesis are always building altars. So it seems like something primitive and peculiar that you might easily shrug off, and most people do.

Actually, it is not animal sacrifice. It is a primitive form of a contract, or of a political treaty. Two parties are about to make an agreement. Perhaps two chieftains are settling on a boundary between their respective territories. These animals are cut in half longitudinally, and laid out on the ground. And then the two chieftains, the two negotiators, step into the midst of those slain animals. And there, in between the pieces of carnage, they establish their agreement. And the implication is that if either party breaks the agreement, they will be destroyed in the way that these animals were destroyed. That’s the gist of it. Obviously, we don’t know a lot about this kind of stuff. It’s mentioned elsewhere in the Bible only once, in Jeremiah. We have some knowledge of it from other cultures in the ancient near East. But even from the little that we know, we can draw some important conclusions.

And the important thing about this story is that God, and God alone, places himself in the midst of the slain animals. Abraham prepares the animals, and even has to chase away the vultures that see a free meal. It's as though Abraham is waiting for God to arrive as evening approaches. And then, in the middle of the night, perhaps in a dream, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between the split carcasses of the animals. This smoke and fire is God, or at least a representation of God. So God, and God alone, certifies this agreement, which in Genesis is called a covenant. Under normal circumstances, Abraham would have been standing in the midst of the slain animals. Or Abraham would have been face to face with God, in the midst of the slain animals. But in the story, Abraham is in a deep sleep. And so God is taking it all upon himself. Whatever pain or risk is entailed in this covenant, God takes upon himself.

This would have surprised the original hearers of this story. Abraham is more of the supplicant, the weaker of the two parties. Abraham definitely should be the one making the guarantees. Abraham definitely should be the one who will suffer if he breaks the relationship. But no, God almighty makes the guarantees, and God almighty makes himself vulnerable. That's unexpected. It breaks the norms of what the original audience for this story would have anticipated. In John's version of the Last Supper, Jesus washes the feet of the Twelve. Peter protests that it is not right for the superior one to take on the role of an inferior. This is the same kind of thing in Genesis chapter 15, only we don't have a Peter in the Genesis story ready to blurt out how inappropriate and upside down this covenant is.

When this story is repeated in church this August, it will only have the first six verses, the more famous part of the story. The stars. The faith. The faith reckoned as righteousness. But in this season of Lent, we get the extra details about the making of the covenant. Why is that? One of the things that we will hear about during Holy Week is how Jesus is the lamb of God, Jesus is the passover lamb who is sacrificed for us. When the God of Abraham goes into the midst of those slain animals, the God of Abraham is making it clear that he will take on the role of suffering and death for the sake of his relationship with Abraham. In the context of Lent, in the context of our journey with Jesus toward Jerusalem, these extra verses describing the making of the covenant with Abraham reveal the self-sacrificing nature of God's love. Perhaps the greatest mistake that I encounter among Christians, among members of my own denomination, is the mistake—the heresy, actually—that the God of the Old Testament is not the same as the God of Jesus. But here in Genesis 15, we have some of the key beliefs of Christianity. That God's love is gracious. It is unearned. And that God is willing to sacrifice himself for our sake. And that our faith in God is how we are made righteous, how we are able to be in his presence. It's bundled up in ancient near eastern culture and practices, but it's clearly there. The nature of God does not change from the Old Testament to the New Testament. The God of the Jews becomes the God of the Gentiles. But the nature of God does not change.

In these days and weeks of Lent, we are invited to renew and reflect upon our relationship with God. The story of Abraham tells us that God makes a covenant with us—a relationship—in which God is willing to take on great burdens and great suffering for our sake. We will see that

covenant love in action during Holy Week. But we should trust in that covenant love this week and every week. Amen.