

## Genesis Journeys IV: Pilgrimage and Promise

### Scene 1: Genesis 15:1-6 Promise One Confirmed

#### *Meditation*

We've pictured Abram receiving this vision from the Lord – a vision during which God promises Abram descendants as numerous as the stars. But during this vision, we have also been alerted to one of the big problems in Abram's story – Abram doesn't have an heir, a child that is his own, and if we look way back in Genesis 11:30, we hear that at least part of this reason was because Sarai was barren. When God tells Abram that his "reward will be very great," Abram, the 75-year-old pilgrim without a home and without a family of his own, can't think of what kind of reward he could have that would match up to what he really wanted but was sure he couldn't have – children of his own. And so, Abram was faced with a choice – would he believe God's unbelievable promise? Or, would he let fear of the unknown motivate him to make poor choices like he did when he lied to the Pharaoh in Egypt and put Sarai in danger? Would he trust God to help him live into the promise or would he try to make the promise come true his own way? Fear of the unknown road ahead can make us act in all sorts of unhelpful ways. But God speaks words of comfort into our fears, asking us to trust in the promise. Before we hear the next part of Abram's encounter with God in Genesis 15, let us sing those words of comfort from:

VT #596

Don't Be Afraid

### Scene 2: Genesis 15: 7-11, Promise Two Confirmed Through Ritual

#### *Meditation*

If Abram wrestled with fear of the unknown about his lack of descendants, he likely also wrestled with fear of the unknown regarding a *land* for him and his descendants to settle and flourish in. God had said he would lead him to the land of Canaan, but Abram was a pilgrim moving towards a promise and he must have wondered when he or his descendants would be able to truly call anywhere home. In this scene that Linda just depicted for us in her reading, we find God promising Abram that his descendants would possess the land in the future – God had done this back in Genesis 12:7 and now God does it again here and begins to formalize this promise through what is for us a strange ancient ritual of covenant making.

In ancient cultures, agreements were sometimes made by having both parties to the agreement walk through the two halves of animals laid out on the ground and that is why people sometimes even today talk about "cutting a deal." Some scholars think in ancient cultures this ritual was each party's way of saying, "May what happened to this animal happen to me if I don't keep my promise." Try to imagine Abram, following God's command to prepare for this covenant making ceremony – getting the animals, putting them in place, and then warding off

the vultures while he waits to see how God will join in this ritual. As he waited on God in this strange moment, I wonder what Abram might have feared now? For one, I can imagine that Abram was fearful of the vultures (they often represented a sign of something bad). But maybe Abram was even afraid of what this agreement with God might mean for him and his descendants. I wonder, did Abraham ever fear whether his descendants would be able to keep up their end of the agreement with God? Did he worry that they would fail, breaking the covenant? Did he worry that God would abandon his people if they failed? Fear of failing is something we can all relate to. Before we hear the last part of Abram's encounter with God in Genesis 15, let us imagine Abraham warding off the vultures and singing the words of comfort that God addressed him with at the beginning of this chapter:

VT #596

Don't Be Afraid

### **Scene 3: Genesis 15:12-21, Covenant**

#### *Meditation*

Abram might have been tired from warding off the vultures while he waited for God, but the deep sleep God put him in did not prove restful – rather, he was weighed down by a “deep and terrifying darkness.” God's promise, he learned, would not be fulfilled in an instant, and it would not come without the pain and the struggle of slavery in what we know will later be Egypt. God's promise that Abram would die in a good old age might have given him some comfort, but I'm sure Abram felt some disappointment and perhaps, as he anticipated having to walk through the two-halves of the animals, Abram might have felt some fear about the future – what would it hold and what would this covenant with God all lead to? But, surprisingly, it appears that Abram didn't end up walking through the passage between the animals at all. Instead, God's presence appeared like a “smoking fire pot and a flaming torch,” and passed through the pieces of the animals. God cut a covenant with Abram to give him land and at least in this story, God did not ask Abram for any promises in return. The promise, we learn, begins with the undeserved grace and mercy of God.

Through this ancient ritual, God promised Abram he would inherit land in the future – lots of land. But did you notice it was land that was already occupied? All the names that Linda read tell us that people were already living there and sharing the land with Abram and his family. How was this divinely promised Abrahamic possession of land going to work? Did the people living in that land have a say in how Abram's descendants would inherit their land? How would Abram's later descendants interpret God's promise of land? Would they seek to inherit the land by taking it violently from the Canaanites with a sword and shield of steel? Or would they try to inherit the land through sharing the land as Abram had exemplified in his relationships with the local Canaanite Kings? Would they inherit the land through a nationalist agenda, where groups exist to protect their own and to demonize the “other,” or would they inherit the land in a way that did “justice” and showed “mercy” to the stranger?

As pilgrims on this earth, the biblical stories of Abram and so many other stories in the bible point us to these and other divergent choices. Sometimes the bible's authors endorse one choice, sometimes another. No matter how painful it is to admit it, we can't whitewash or justify, for example, the fact that some of the biblical writers depict God's promise to Abraham and his descendants as calling for the displacement of the local Indigenous inhabitants of Canaan. In the face of this, we must make an interpretive choice, and certainly, as Anabaptists and as a Peace church, we have. We can center and lift up those parts of the bible that depict God's promise as a blessing for the world, as welcome for the stranger, and as peace on earth, because this is what we have been shown in Jesus. This still leaves us with troubling texts in the bible that we dare not ignore. Ignoring troubling texts is detrimental to our discipleship, because it can lead us to self-deception, preventing us from facing the darker side of our humanity. Instead of ignoring these texts, we can *use* them to reveal the truth about tensions playing out in our own time too—tensions between the possession of land and the displacement of people—tensions between our peace stance on paper and whether we actually live that peace out—tensions between our desire to be welcoming to all and our desire to live with what's predictable, to be safe and secure in our own land, with our own rules and traditions. As we live in these tensions, we do well to trust still in the God of pilgrim Abram, the God that a young woman named Mary would proclaim thousands of years after Abram's death (cf. Luke 1:46-55): the God that looks with favor on the lowly, whose mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation, who scatters the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, who brings down the powerful from their thrones, and lifts up the lowly; who fills the hungry with good things, and sends the rich away empty; who helps his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made...to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Abram and Sarai have many journeys ahead of them yet – as pilgrims following a promise they will need God's guidance on those journeys—guidance to make good decisions and to birth a people whose very existence will be a blessing to the world. We too have many journeys ahead of us – and while we have a place we call home, we do well to see ourselves in our own way as pilgrims on a journey, following the promise of the world transformed by the love and goodness of God. And, like Abram and Sarai, we also need God's guidance for our journeys so that we might be a blessing to others. So, as we end this particular leg of our Genesis Journeys, let us show our need of God's guidance, by singing together our Hymn of Response, VT 606 – Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah.