

Genesis 12:1-8

Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land.' So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord.

Luke 9:23-27

Then he said to them all, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words, of them the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. But truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.'

“The Promise Keepers”**Rev. Meg Ryan****September 5, 2010**

This past Sunday at the church picnic, I had the privilege of being one of the dunk-ees in the church dunk tank. I'll tell you, sitting on a small bench a few feet over a tank of water can have the effect of making you bargain with God. And last Sunday at the church picnic, as I flinched each time the ball came dangerously close to the target, which would make me one with the freezing cold water, I admit to praying brief prayers to God that somehow the button wouldn't function properly, and I would thus remain dry. Well, after twenty minutes of sitting on that bench and not getting dunked once, I began to get cocky. I started telling those who asked, how I'd stayed dry for so long. That it was because I had God on my side. And more than a couple times, the ball actually hit the target, bounced off, and there I stayed, dry on the bench, just half a second above the freezing cold water. Then, someone came along and offered me some delicious-looking watermelon. And as I began to say, "No thank you, not right now," suddenly I found myself submerged in a freezing cold tank of water. And that's when I learned my lesson. There's no bargaining with God. And never turn down good watermelon.

So, bargaining might not work so well. But what about when God makes a promise to us? The Bible is filled with the promises to the followers of God, promises that come at different times in history, for different reasons, promising all sorts of different things. So how, as followers of God, do we keep all these promises straight? Well, we are told first of all, that as followers of God we are blessed. In the passage read today, God tells Abram, "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you. I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you, I will curse. And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." These blessings seem pretty clear.

Yet, even as a group of people who all believe in God and in Jesus Christ as the son of God, we Christians don't always agree how these promises of the Bible should translate to your lives here and now. During my first year of seminary, I figured this out first-hand. A group of us decided to go to a certain mega-church to check it out. What the girls of the group didn't realize until we got in the car in our nice skirts and fancy dresses, was that the guys had decided on their own that the guys had decided on their own to go out and buy bright plaid suits at the local thrift store, thus making our entire group stick out like a sore thumb as we walked onto the lavish campus of the church. When we went to the service, we were impressed by the cameras staring straight at us in the congregation, and the 15-piece orchestra. The head pastor's son stood up and gave a sermon, speaking of how, because he was a follower of God, he had been blessed in many ways. He spoke of how those in his family were also good Christians, and they had also thus been blessed. Then he went to the altar, where there was a pile of books that he had written, and he began to list each one, holding them up as he read. Because he was a faithful Christian, he recounted, he had been blessed to write these books and to have the successes that he had had in his lifetime up to this point. I will never forget the impact that this particular sermon had on me. Something just didn't feel right about it to me, though I couldn't tell you what it was at the time. I have heard many other sermons from this man's father, and have appreciated what he had to say, but this particular sermon left me with many more questions than answers.

To some it seems that the blessings and promises of God are pretty clear. As long as we follow God, and God favors us, those who we like will also be blessed, and those who we don't get along with will be destroyed, burnt to a crisp. But for others, this type of theology is fine as long as it doesn't go too far, and doesn't lead to a worldview that is more self-serving than God-serving. Then Jesus comes along, and he also has his blessings to give, but his blessings are different. His promises are not the promises humans had gotten used to by the time he rolled around. Instead of Abrahamic promise, Jesus says, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." More confusing than that, he tells us, "Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man." Just as with the promise of Abraham, there is something that appeals to some of us about this statement, and something that might cause us a little anxiety as well. Which brings me to a specific New Testament Scripture, which some scholars today, such as Walter Wink, would say we have been misinterpreting all these years, and that is Luke, Chapter 6, verse 29. In this verse, Jesus instructs us that if someone strikes you on the cheek, you should

offer the other also. Now, this can be interpreted to mean that any time someone approaches us with a difference of opinion, or doesn't like us, we ought to simply let them have their way. If they harm us, we must not do anything in return, to defend ourselves. Yet in order for us to understand these statements, it is important for us to understand the context in which they were written. In Jesus' time, there were certain rules that society lived by, that we are not so aware of nowadays. For example, as Walter Wink points out, the relationship between a master and their servant was all about power difference. Now if I can have Ray Batch come forward, he has graciously decided to help me put this into context.

I will be the slave or servant, and Ray is the master. So if I have done something to upset Ray, and make him angry, then what he will do is, he will backhand me with his right hand.... So that shows the power difference, that you backhand someone that is lower than you, considered not your equal. So that is how the master shows his power. Now, if I were then to turn my cheek to my left cheek, he is not allowed to use his left hand, and do you know why this is? This is because back in those times, the left hand was considered unclean and defiled. It was only used for bathroom purposes. If you used it for anything else, then you made yourself unclean in society, and that was bad. So he can only use his right hand to hit my left cheek..... See, he is forced to do it in a forward motion, making me his equal. Thank you very much, Ray.

Turning the other cheek, then, isn't an act of just allowing violence to happen. To turn the other cheek is an act of self-empowerment, not self-denial. Like Rosa Parks, who refused to sit at the back of the bus any longer, Jesus teaches us to see ourselves as children of God, with rights like anyone else, despite our social status in this world. So we may find that with these two specific sets of promises that I've mentioned today, both the Abrahamic and the promises of Jesus, there is something beautiful about them, as well as a danger to go to an unhealthy place in responding to each one. And this, I think, comes from our uneasiness with the mysterious or the undefined. We want answers, and we want them now. We try to compartmentalize the promises of God into what benefits us, and our needs, and our point of view. Throughout history as humans, if the promises in the Bible do not look like what we think they should, we conveniently skip over those and move on to the next. When we do this, we are not much different from the unicorn in the poem by Shel Silverstein, "Help." It goes like this:

I walked through the wildwood, and what did I see?
But a unicorn with his horn stuck in a tree.
Crying, 'Someone, please help me, before it's too late.'
I hollered, 'I'll free you.' He hollered back, 'Wait!
How much will it hurt? How long will it take?
Are you sure that my horn will not scratch, bend, or break?
How hard will you pull? How much must I pay?
Must you do it right now? Or is Wednesday okay?
Have you done this before? Do you have the right tools?
Have you graduated from Horn Saving School?
Will I owe you a favor, and what will it be?

Do you promise that you will not damage the tree?
Shall I close my eyes? Should I sit down, or stand?
Do you have insurance? Have you washed your hands?
And after you free me, tell me, what then?
Can you guarantee I won't get stuck again?
Tell me when, tell me how, tell me why, tell me where?
My guess is that he is still sitting there.

You see, sometimes we discover God's promises in the unexpected, when we give up trying to put everything into what we're comfortable with. And in the situations where we'd much rather walk away than dance with the unknown, that is where we find the mystery of God. Such an experience happened for me about a year and a half ago. One sunny day in February, when I was still living in California, my friend and I decided to go to San Diego for the day. We ended up talking to the man at the hot dog stand on the corner and his friend, and then soon came a man who had tattoos all over him. I noticed that the tattoos were religious symbols from Buddhism, Christianity, and Hinduism, so I asked him about them, and I asked him which religion he most identified with, and that is when he shut down. He said, "I don't trust religion, it's the root of most evils in the world." For a moment, I was tempted to leave it at that and just walk away. But something compelled me to keep on going. "That's interesting," I said. "Actually, I'm a pastor of a small church, a United Methodist one, about two hours east of here." As I rambled on, I felt my face go numb, not sure what his reaction would be. And to my surprise, this rambling statement of mine led to a conversation that still stays with me today. We talked about how nature can make you feel so small and so privileged at the same time. About how he had learned a lot about life and people and God from a cross-country trip on a Greyhound bus. About how this world would be a much better place if everyone just followed in the footsteps of God and of Jesus.

When we were done with our conversation, we shook hands, and then he did something that startled all of us around him. He threw his hands up in the air and shouted loudly, "God is great!" I smiled, and then responded, "Yes, yes, God is great." The hot dog vendor and his friend looked at us like aliens, for having connected on such a deep level in such a short amount of time. As he walked away, I couldn't help but smile to myself. I will never forget what I learned about God's promises that day. I learned that when we open ourselves up to new experiences, God promises to turn it into something unexpected and to connect us to new people and ideas that we were once closed off from. There is promise in the unknown. There is promise in the unfolding of mystery through time. There is promise in reaching out to the other, and learning from them. There is promise in each day, to change and grow from the people and situations around us.

I'd like to end with the words from one of my favorite hymns, The Hymn of Promise, which I think explains the mystery of God's promise better than I ever could. Here's the second verse:

There's a song in every silence, seeking work and melody
There's a dawn in every darkness, bringing hope to you and me.

From the past will come the future, what it holds a mystery
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

We are keepers of the many promises, and of the life-transforming mystery of God.
Thanks be to God.