



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT, MARCH 17, 2019  
GENESIS 15:1-12,17-18; PSALM 27:11-18; PHILIPPIANS 3:17-4:1; LUKE 13:31-35

## ABRAHAM'S DESCENDANTS

**GENESIS 15:1-12,17-18** *[The word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." But the word of the LORD came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir." He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.*

*Then he said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess." But he said, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.*

*As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates."]*

From the moment we left the airport in Tel Aviv to begin our Holy Land pilgrimage in January, the question of the land was always before us. Who owns it? Who controls it? Who lives on it now? Who lived on it 100 years ago? 1500 years ago?

And closely connected to the question of the land were other questions of human rights and well-being: Who has a safe, permanent home? Who can travel? Who has access to water, electricity, education and health care? Who can find work and at what wage?

The most frequent response we heard to these questions from people who live in Israel/Palestine is, “It is complicated.” It is complicated and impossible to address fully in a 10-minute sermon. But the answer to questions of who has universal human rights and well-being was rarely “the Palestinians.”

The question of the land goes back thousands of years to the sacred stories of Israel’s origin and God’s covenant with Abram, one of which we heard in our first reading today. But the full story of Abram begins several chapters earlier in Genesis, when God first calls him out of his homeland and into Canaan. In the beginning, God promises Abram, “I will bless you and make of you a great nation, so that you will be a blessing. In you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”

The story of Abram and Sarai (who later receive the names Abraham and Sarah) unfolds as they make their way as nomadic shepherds across Canaan, Egypt, and elsewhere. By the time we get to today’s story, they are over 70 years old. And they are wealthy – with more livestock, gold, silver, tents and tribe than they can measure. Yet they still long for children, for heirs.

So when God comes to Abram in a vision promising protection and reward, Abram is skeptical, “What can you give me? I have no offspring. Someone else will have to stand

in as my heir.” It’s a practical question – family was the basic unit of society and establishing a lineage was important for community stability. Abram needs estate planning.

But there is more to Abram’s question than planning for his heirs and successors. He can count his own blessings but does not see the legacy of blessing that extends from him to anyone else, let alone all the families of the earth. So God shows him the starry heavens and says, “Count the stars if you can – so shall your descendants be.”

Abram is likely still skeptical, but he trusts God. And God makes a second promise: “to your descendants I give all the land from the river Nile to the River Euphrates.” This description is so vast, it’s like saying, “they will have all the land you can imagine.” Or “they will have all the land they need.” It is a promise of safety and permanence and flourishing. A promise of blessing for all the families of the earth.

On our Holy Land pilgrimage, we visited Abraham’s tomb in the Cave of the Patriarchs – where Sara, Jacob, Rachel, Isaac and Leah are also buried -- in the ancient city of Hebron. It is a sacred place for all Abrahamic faiths – Jews, Muslims, Christians, and several other traditions, too. It’s an extremely tense place, too. Hebron is a Palestinian city, but with an Israeli

settlement in the old city and partial control by the Israeli military, there are daily opportunities for conflict. And violence and bloodshed have been happening there for millennia.

In the first century, Herod the Great built a huge limestone structure over the tombs, but when the city was conquered in the Byzantine period, it was converted to a Christian basilica. During the Muslim conquest, it became a mosque. With the Crusades, a Christian site, and in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, it became a mosque again. In 1967, Israel took control of the site and divided the structure into a synagogue and mosque that share a common wall and where each can separately view Abraham's tomb.

The underlying narrative of this history, of course, is that God's holy ground is limited, exclusive, and must be hoarded. The bloodshed continued at Abraham's tomb; in February 1994, an American-Israeli opened fire in the mosque, killing 30 people and injuring 125. That's why the window through which we viewed the tomb is bullet-proof glass.

And terror continues to strike holy places. Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston in 2015 – 9 killed and 3 injured. Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh last fall – 11 killed, 7 injured. And now, Friday's attacks on two

mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. 50 people are dead – so far - and 50 injured.

How long, O God, will this go on?

How long until we realize that there is no enemy “out there” that must be vilified and conquered to ensure our safety? Our safety comes from interdependence and connection; from really knowing our neighbor. The Palestinians we met on our pilgrimage had three consistent requests of us: 1) Do not forget us. 2) Pray for us. And, 3) Tell the people back home that we are the same as you. We are not your enemy.

When God made the covenant with Abraham – the ancestor of all Jews, Christians and Muslims – before any mention of land, God said, “I will bless you, so that you will be a blessing. In you all the families of the earth will be blessed.” How long until we realize that there is no land, no blessing, no flourishing that can ever be only mine? It is always, only, ours, a gift from God.

It is deeply wrong for Palestinians to live in the vulnerability, oppression and fear they currently do as a result of expanding and tightening control of the Israeli authority. And it is deeply wrong that Muslims throughout the world are targets of terror and destruction because of well-armed Islamophobia.

After the shootings in Christchurch on Friday, New Zealand's prime minister, Jacinda Ardern, lamented the unprecedented violence in her country, reminding her fellow citizens that, "Many of those affected are members of our migrant communities – New Zealand is their home – they are us."

They are us, too. Our Muslim neighbors, our migrant communities of any faith – we are brothers and sisters, the heirs of God's

blessing meant for all the families of the earth. What we do with it and how we live together forms the legacy for those who follow – for our heirs.

How can we trust that there is enough blessing for all of us?

Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.



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