

Conversations With God: Can I Trust Your Promises?
Genesis 15:1-18,21 5/20/12

This morning we begin a new sermon series, Conversations With God. The idea was suggested by Richard Gray. The more I thought about it, the more I liked it.

Focusing on key conversations between God and people in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures has two key benefits: (one) it covers a great deal of theological territory and (two) it is intensely personal.

It's hard to fly off into the stratosphere of theological abstraction when we're looking at an actual conversation between God and a person. There has been quite a bit of enthusiasm expressed about our church's emphasis on practical spirituality. This sermon series will continue that emphasis.

Before plunging into our first conversation, I would like to set the context with some observations about gardening from Ajahn Brahm, the Australian Buddhist monk and abbot whose insights on spirituality have been found to be of immense help by many Christians. He writes:

"Most people in Australia have a garden with their house, but only a few know how to find peace in their garden. For the rest, the garden is just another place for work. So I encourage those with a garden to nurture its beauty by working a while and nurture their hearts by just sitting peacefully in the garden, enjoying nature's gifts.

The first gardener thinks this is a jolly good idea. So they decide to get all the little jobs out of the way first, and then they will allow themselves a few moments of peace in their garden. After all, the lawn does need mowing, the flowers could do with a good watering, the leaves need raking, the bushes need pruning, the path needs sweeping... Of course, it takes up all their free time just to get a fraction of those 'little jobs' out of the way. Their work is never finished, so they never get to have a few minutes of peace...

The second gardener thinks they are much smarter than the first. They put away the rakes and the watering cans and sit out in the garden reading a magazine -- probably with big, glossy pictures of nature. But that's enjoying your magazine, not finding peace in your garden.

The third gardener puts away all the gardening tools, all the magazines, newspapers, and radios, and just sits in the peace of their garden -- for about two seconds! Then they start thinking: 'That lawn really needs mowing, and those bushes should be pruned soon. If I don't water those flowers within a few days, they may die. And maybe a nice gardenia would go well in that corner. Yes! with one of those ornamental birdbaths in front. I could pick one up at the nursery...' That is enjoying thinking and planning. Again, there is no peace of mind there.

Now the fourth gardener, the wise one, considers: 'I've worked long enough, now is the time to enjoy the fruit of my work, to listen for the peace. [to listen for the peace.] So even though the lawn needs mowing and the leaves need raking and blah! blah! blah! -- not now.' This way, we find the wisdom to enjoy the garden even though it's not perfect."

I think Ajahn Brahm's comments on gardening can serve as a metaphor for our relationship with God. Transposing Brahm's descriptions of the four gardeners into four different ways of attempting to have a relationship with God, we come up with the following: (These are purposefully exaggerated to make a point.)

Our first person is so caught up in the life of the church -- committee meetings, physical upkeep, mission outreach programs, bible study, choir, Wednesday workshop, Wednesday afternoon communion -- that she or he has no time for a person to person relationship with God. Of course, all these activities are good in themselves, but doing too many of them can actually act as a barrier between us and God.

Our second person focuses so much on reading books about God that there is no energy left for a relationship with God.

Our third person actually creates a daily space for prayer and meditation, but instead of allowing distracting thoughts to come and go, winds up focusing on the distracting thoughts, permitting them to fill the space and time which had been reserved for God.

Our fourth person -- who corresponds to the gardener who "listens for the peace"- is careful not to overextend him or herself with too many church activities, reads books about God as a way of preparing to be with God more closely, and has learned how to pray simply and meditate deeply. When distractions come during their daily quiet time with God, they encourage the distractions to go just as easily as they have come. They have learned that walking or sitting in quiet meditation, while not a way of putting God "on demand," is the only effective way of making themselves available to God, of readying themselves for a conversation with God.

Before we turn to today's scripture text, I need to give you a little background. Mainstream biblical scholars see the first eleven chapters of the book of Genesis as coming from the world of mythology. The stories contained in these chapters wrestle with some of life's deepest questions, and give us some pivotal theological answers to those questions. They do not describe historical persons in historical time, but mythological persons in mythological time.

Beginning with the saga of Abraham in chapter twelve, we move into a world that can be known in terms of historical remembrance. In contrast to the imperial and impersonal religions of Mesopotamia and Egypt, Abraham stands out as the first person in this part of the world to have a personal relationship with God which took the form of shared conversation. Casey Frazier picked up on this dynamic in his choice of Paul Simon's "Under African Skies" to echo this morning's scripture text.

Specifically, the repeated words "this is the story of how we begin to remember" in that song captures the infinitely significant move from being caught up in the religion of empire, where there is nothing personal to remember, to being called by God into a one-on-one relationship:

"This is the story of how we begin to remember."

In opposition to the rigid determinism of the empire religions of the Fertile Crescent, at the beginning of the twelfth chapter of the book of Genesis God singles out a specific person, Abraham, and says to him,

"Abram, get up and go! Leave your country. Leave your relatives and your father's home, and travel to the land I will show you. Don't worry -- I will guide you there. I have plans to make a great people of your descendants...through your descendants, all the families of the earth will find their blessing in you." (Genesis 12:1-3)

Abram's response to this word from God was precisely to get up and go. (Genesis 12:4)

Several years pass, years that bring us to this morning's scripture reading. The essential context for our text is that Abram still does not have an heir. God comes to Abram in a vision. Abram's vision takes the form of a dialogue between God and himself. The vision is nothing less than a close person-to-person conversation. Nothing could spotlight more dramatically the essentially relational nature of Abram's faith. Abram's faith in God reflects the trust and intimacy characteristic of the closest parent-child relationships. It also reflects the innocence and naiveté of the child who can ask the parent an artless question, like Abram does when immediately after God appears and tells him not to be afraid and that his reward will be great, Abram wastes no time indulging in his litany of complaint:

"Eternal Lord, what could you possibly give to me that would make that much of a difference in my life? After all, I am still childless, and Eliezer of Damascus stands to inherit all I own. Since you have not given me the gift of children, my only heir will be one the servants born in my household."

The custom Abram refers to -- that of a servant becoming heir if there were no son to assume this position -- was a common one in Mesopotamia during the early part of the second millennium b.c.e. -- approximately 1800 -- but a custom that had been abandoned long before the bible was put together in written form -- a strong indication of the authenticity of the traditions behind the patriarchal narratives. What stands out for me is how much this ancient conversation between God and Abram rings true to my own experience:

God speaks, and what is my typical response? To indulge in my own complaining, just like Abram!

How much like a loving parent God is toward me -- to put up with all my immaturity and all my complaining -- and not to angrily withdraw from the conversation. Does this ring true to your own experience?

God goes on to clarify God's promise, revealing to Abram that his heir will not be his servant, but his child. Verse five gives us the scene of God as a loving parent showing Abram the star-filled sky has a concrete image of the fulfillment of his promise. As Paul Simon's song has it, "His path was marked by the stars."

Let us linger awhile on this verse to encounter more fully the relational intimacy which it conveys. Perhaps it is not going too far to read between the lines a bit and to imagine a particularly moving parent-child retreat, the last night of which the parent and child struggle together through the dark forest at the base of the mountain, finally emerging into a clearing and the overpowering impact of a moonless night heavy with stars. The parent and child sit together in silence for a long time, drinking in the mystery of the heavens. Then the parent turns to the child and says that the child will stand at the head of a people who will be as numberless as the stars.

Imagine the impact of the parent's statement on the child -- imagine the impact of God's reassurance on Abram. "His path was marked by the stars."

Verse six: *"Abram believed and trusted in God's promises, so God counted it to his favor as righteousness."* One of the most celebrated verses in the Hebrew scriptures, condenses into theological shorthand the redemptive nature of personal belief and trust in God. This verse is so important because it states in summary form the essence of the God-person relationship, belief and trust, which carries one into a stance of "righteousness," or right relationship with God.

"Righteous," then, is the biblical term describing the state of a person who lives out the primary reality of a believing, trusting relationship with God.

"Righteousness" is not something that one can earn, something that God owes a person; it is simply the gift of grace which springs from an intimate relationship with God.

God goes on to remind Abram that this is the same God who called him forth from his homeland and that the promise of a new homeland is assured. In response, Abram asks yet another of his impertinent questions:

"But Eternal Lord, how am I supposed to know that I really will possess it?"

Instead of getting angry, God does one of the most amazing things in all of scripture. God has a wonderful way of meeting people where they are -- in the midst of their own uniquely human, cultural, and historical limitations -- and graciously gives Abram a sign.

The sign God gives is that of a covenant. This covenant, like the typical near eastern covenant of the time, features sacrificial animals that are cut into two pieces. Under normal circumstances, the inferior party, Abram, would have to walk between the two halves, dramatizing the fact that if he were to break the covenant -- if he were to

break his promise -- he too would be split in two, just like the animals he is passing through.

In this particular covenant, however, God switches roles with Abram. God symbolically passes through the split animals in the form of fire. Given the time in which Abram lived, it would be impossible to think of a more powerful expression of God's commitment to Abram, of God's promise to keep God's promises.

As descendants of Abraham, we see God's covenant renewed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Once again, God does not ask that we, the inferior party, commit to death if we fail to keep the covenant. Once again God takes on death to demonstrate to us once and for all that we can trust God's promises.

Amen.

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