

State College Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Charles Curley

Children of Promise 3
Genesis 18:16-33
Luke 4:14-21; 40-43

“Behold, I have taken upon myself to speak to the Lord,
I who am but dust and ashes.”
Genesis 18:27

What does it mean for us to be children of promise?

We are looking to Abraham and Sarah as our models. To learn from them how we are to receive God’s promise.

The first week, Abraham had faith.

Last week Sarah laughed.

Faith and laughter. Not a bad beginning for Children of Promise.

But this week – Abraham argues. Argues with God.

It's a complex and troubling story.

This story of Abraham, God and the wicked city of Sodom.

When Abraham argued with God.

Do you remember the story?

God decided to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah because “the outcry against (them) is great, and their sin is very grave.”

Those people were some wicked!

And they were not even Abraham's people.

Sodom and Gomorrah were the cities of Lot.

Lot was the nephew of Abraham.

When Abraham offered to give his nephew any part of the promised land he wanted, Lot chose the cushy fertile low lands, all around the cities.

Lot let his uncle have the barren hillsides. Nice nephew.

Neither Lot nor the dwellers of Sodom nor the residents of Gomorrah could see that they were in the vice of destruction.

Abraham knew what was about to happen.

Lot didn't.

He would've stayed in the valley of distraction if he hadn't been let out by the hand.

The only one who saw, knew, what would happen to Sodom was Abraham. And he only saw because God, told him.

God did not want to tell Abraham, because God knew Abraham.

Did you notice how God tried to avoid Abraham knowing?

"The Lord said: 'Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?'"

God knew Abraham inside out.

God knew Abraham would argue – argue even against God – to stop the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

But startling as it is that anyone would argue with God, this story is more than the memory of something some ancient tribesman did

back then.

It is the complex story of the debate that rages between every Abraham and God.

Even the Abrahams within us.

Such a story cries out to be explained

The argument between Abraham and God probes a profound question, “what is the character of the holy that drives the cosmos?”

Are all the forces of God that move us tied to retribution?

That's what Abraham questioned.

God, with all the power of the Angels and principalities, was going to destroy Sodom.

Sodom had sinned.

Sodom was evil beyond a shadow of doubt.

Sodom would be destroyed.

Retribution.

Payment.

Punishment for doing wrong.

Then Abraham stuck his face in the face of God and asked, “Is there nothing that will stop this holy retribution?”

Is there nothing to change the course of reward and punishment?

What would it take?

How many innocent, how many good people in wicked Sodom?

Would it take to change the course of holy retribution?

50?

Would 50 change the course?

Would the character of the holy see that retribution is unjust if even 50 righteous live there?

OK, if 50, than how about 45?

When Abraham found the final number, he found an alternative way of being in the world.

Abraham's alternative was as phenomenal as stopping the tide from coming in or going out.

Before Abraham's argument, the guilty determine the future.

It was deemed by God and humanity that the guilty could corrupt the innocent.

So the bad apples had to be eliminated.

Now, for the first time, Abraham stuck his face in the face of God and argued that the innocent, the good, could determine the future.

The innocent, the good, could intercede even to save even the guilty.

Even Sodom.

With that argument, Abraham defines the meaning of humanity; and saves the humanity of God, even if in the end he could not save Sodom.

Thank God for Abraham.

Why should the guilty always determine the future?

Sometimes, they still do.

One small illustration.

You will be able to think of others.

Have you ever known someone who wallows in guilt even though from your perspective they had done nothing wrong?

It's a phenomenon sometimes found in victims of crime.

They have done nothing wrong, but deep down they believe that somehow they deserve the bad thing that happened to them.

Somehow they deserve some punishment.

They didn't do something right.

Somehow they weren't smart enough to avoid the bad thing that happened to them.

If they had just been smarter.

If they had just been clever.

And so they feel guilty.

Because some one had done something bad to them – it must be their fault!

They believe that the character of the holy that moves their being is retribution.

Somehow whatever guilt they have, whatever they are guilty for, should be paid.

They carry that guilt.

Their friends say “you have nothing to be guilty for.”

But they can't help it.

The bad that was done to them defines their future.

With Abraham, for the first time, the innocent, the good, determine the future.

The innocent intercede for the whole body.

Where does that Abraham speak for you?

The Abraham that dares to argue against the course of unending retribution in the world?

Some of you have carried Abraham's argument into your community.

If there are 50 in this community who authentically care about the quality of life here, cannot we by working together improve our lives and the lives of all who live in our community?

Some of you have said I will be one of the 50 out of the whole state who will challenge what we are doing to the environment. If there are at least 50 of us, we can make a difference.

Some of you have said I will be one of the 50 out of the whole nation who will question before God and humanity why there cannot be peace in this world! If there are even 50 of us can't we find an alternative to "wars and rumors of wars," as the Bible puts the eternal state of our world.

Have you found that Abraham within yourself?

Have you heard them?

It's important because God said all people will bless themselves

through Abraham.

So may it be.

They're about 400 of us here this morning.

Are you ready for the sermon to be over so we can get on with our morning prayers?

Which sounds quite ordinary until we realize that to be ready to pray is to be ready to intercede with God against all the destructive forces that are loose in the world.

Prayer sounds quite ordinary until we begin to envision names, faces caught in the frenzy of those forces.

How many of our friends, close friends are being tossed to and fro like corks on a sea of trouble?

How many of our friends are sliding with increasing speed to the very pits of existence. And we try so say something to bear them up. But the slide continues.

Our friends are enactments of the same forces that roar through us. How difficult it is to change one piece of destructive behavior, let alone one negative attitude.

Then consider the forces that keep whole nations like our own captive, the forces that keep the nation from changing, politics and policies which are clearly destructive of life and happiness for our people.

For whatever reasons. From whatever causes. Through whatever forces.

Does this sound far-fetched to you that we are children of Abraham, children of promise, who when we pray are given the mandate to intercede for the good of our world – even if interceding means

arguing with God?

Arguing against the destruction of the innocent with the guilty?

And we must keep interceding – arguing – with God because of the promise that children of Abraham will affect blessing.

We read a promise in the call to worship, “I will make your name great so that she will affect blessing. So then, all the families of the earth can gain a blessing in you.”

And that promise is immediately countered with a question in our minds.

Who are these children of promise who will affect blessing?

To all the families of the earth?

What do they look like?

What do they do?

Well, they look like us.

And what they (we) do is argue with God.

Envision your friends who are torn and battered.

Envision the torn and battered places of our world.

What do you think is the power of our intercession to change what is happening?

You probably think, not much.

Not much even though we sit here 400 strong this July morning.

So we confessed our sense of powerlessness over forces before us.

So we confess how little we believe we can affect blessing for anyone, even ourselves.

And yet can we at least ask if there are 50 among us who dare to step fully into God's presence as Abraham did

Are there 45 among us who will demand forgiveness and the end of destruction?

Suppose there are 40 among us would they be able to open the gate so we may all enter?

30?

20?

If there are ten among us who will display they are heirs of Abraham and children of Promise, will the destruction stop?

If there are none with the displays are heirs of God's Spirit and what if there were one in this whole city?

From Abraham to Jesus we have heard of the promise.

Our Lord said the "Spirit of God is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the fulfilling year of the Lord."

We seek God's presence as desperately as the hungry seek food.

There are so many we would intercede for if we only knew the way.

One? If there were one among us to argue with God?

And what if the one is you?

Amen.