



## ***When to Let the Myth Die***

A Sermon for Northminster Church

Preached by Zachary Helton

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### **Genesis 15:1-12, 17-21**

After these events, the word of YHWH came to Abram in a vision: “Fear not, Abram!

I am your shield; I will make your reward very great.”

Abram said, “But my Sovereign, My God, what good are these blessings to me, so long as Sarai and I will die in disgrace? My only heir is a foreigner who lives in my household, Eliezer of Damascus. Since you have given me no offspring,” Abram continued, “an attendant in my house will be my heir.”

Then the word of YHWH came to Abram and said, “This person will not be your heir. Your heir will be of your own flesh and blood.”

Then God took Abram outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can! As many as that, you will have for descendants.” Abram believed YHWH, and God accounted it to Abram as righteousness. YHWH then said to Abram, “I am YHWH who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land as a possession.”

Abram asked, “Sovereign God, how am I to know that I will possess it?”

God answered Abram, “Bring me a heifer, a goat, and a ram, each three years old, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” Abram brought all of these, cut them in half, and placed each half opposite the other—except the birds, which he did not cut up. Birds of prey swooped down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away. As the sun was about to set, a trance fell over Abram, and a deep, terrifying darkness enveloped him.

When the sun had set and it was dark, a smoking brazier and a flaming torch appeared, which passed between the halves of the sacrifices. On that day YHWH made this covenant with Abram: “To your descendants I give this land, from the River of Egypt to the Great River, the Euphrates: the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.”

There is more than one way to read a story. As a matter of fact, in the spirit of Lent, it is sometimes crucial to find a *new* way of reading a story, of letting the old ways die that they might lend their nutrients to the growth of something better. Let’s take Genesis 15 for example, God’s covenant with Abram. It’s one of the central myths to our faith. So, let me first tell the story as I so often hear it told.

Once, when the world was much younger, a man called Abram was afraid. It was true he sat on top of the world, that he enjoyed a level of power that many before him and many since have only dreamed of tasting, but with no heir, with no son of his own to inherit his wealth and his power, to him it all amounted to nothing. So, there he sat at the entrance to his tent. Arms crossed, his long white beard rested on his knees as he meditated on the futility of it all. Suddenly, his contemplation was interrupted by a deep, rumbling voice.

"Fear not, Abram!" the voice boomed from the heavens. "For I will protect your legacy. You have done all I have asked of you, and your wages will indeed be great!"

"Oh, but my Sovereign, My God!" Abram moaned, "What good is all of the wealth and power you've given me when my wife and I are going to die in shame? What good is it all when we have no son, no one to carry on our name? When we're gone, it'll be like none of it ever happened! Everything I own will go to a servant! A foreigner in my household named Eliezar of Damascus!" Abram stopped and clenched his teeth at the injustice of it all.

"No," God said. "I would never disgrace you, my favored one, in such a way. Your heir will come from your own flesh and blood." Abram felt a force moving him into the open air. The voice commanded: "Look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can! As many as that, you will have for descendants."

As Abram gazed at the multitude of stars twinkling above him, as he stood in the majesty of the moment, he righteously chose to believe God.

"But more than that," God continued, "I, your God, will give you all of this land as *your* possession, for you and your descendants to rule over it in my name."

"But Sovereign God," Abram pushed, "it's one thing to say that, but won't you give me a guarantee that it will be so?"

God agreed, and asked Abram to prepare the covenant. It was the custom of that region that, when making a deal, the parties would carve animals in two and put them on either side of a path. Then, the two parties cutting the deal would walk the path between the animals while reciting the conditions, as if to say, "May this same thing happen to me should I fail to hold up my end of the bargain." So, the next day, Abram retrieved the animals, slaughtered them, and prepared the way.

He finished his work just as the sun was setting, and as the world was plunged into thick darkness, a trance fell over Abram. He saw a flaming torch and a smoking firepot move through the path between the sacrificed animals. He knew without doubt that this was the presence of God. The voice began to speak the terms of the covenant. "Your descendants will rule this land," it rumbled, "from the River of Egypt to the Great River, the Euphrates. Right now, tribes of unclean and profane people live there, but I will wipe them out so that your offspring, who will be pure and righteous, may take the land. I decree that it will belong to them." The torch and firepot finished walking the path and disappeared. The deal was sealed. Abram was dumbfounded. He was not asked to walk the path or speak his end of the bargain. God and God alone had made the deal, and it seemed there was nothing required of Abram but to trust, which he did. This was unprecedented behavior for a god. As the ages

passed, the Word of the Lord came to fruition. Abram's sons would go on to storm the land God has promised them, to slaughter all of the unclean and wicked residents, and rule over the land to which they were entitled with God's blessing.

And now, today, you and I stand in this heritage. We shine among the stars Abram counted that holy night. We are the chosen people of God, chosen to dominate in God's righteous name. We may kill and we may enslave, and we make take the land because it is *our* divine right. God continues to do so much for us. God is on our side.

This is one of our sacred stories. I can't really say "Thanks be to God," though. It feels very, very wrong. And yet, this is one of our sacred stories, it is in the canon our ancestors have maintained and affirmed for generations. So, what do we do with it? A better question might be: what does it do with us? As much as we don't want this to be our story, as repulsive as it might sound, just a cursory glance through our history will show us that it kind of is.

This story, and stories like it, are called myths. Now, by myth I don't mean a lie or fantasy story. That title has no concern at all for historicity; rather, a myth is a story that establishes the world for people. Susan Shaw teaches that myths are stories that create a world. They help us form an imagination for the kind of place we live in. They don't care much about literal meanings, but about creatively representing the relationships between things that we believe to be true. They establish relationships between us and God, between us and them, between us and the land, or us and the power. Myths are our experiences translated into narrative form to give us a shared identity and purpose, a story big enough for us all to find ourselves in. The Abram/Abraham myth is central to three of the world's most influential religions, establishing patterns of relationship that we seem to believe to be true. I heard a journalist this week say: Abraham was neither a Jew, a Christian, or a Muslim, but each claim him and his story as central to their faith.

Like myths do, this story establishes relationships between the people, the Divine, and the land, destructive relationships though they might be. The ramifications of this myth are still playing out in the Middle East today in very real and very violent ways. The myth would later give a justifying framework for manifest destiny, and the extermination of Native Americans, which continues to play out in American exceptionalism, in the fear and hatred of immigrants today.

But that's not the only relationship established in our imaginations by this myth. It establishes a relationship of supremacy between men and women. God did, after all, bless Abraham as the patriarch and pave the way for the next chapter of this story in which Abraham rapes his slave girl Hagar and forces her to carry a child to term so that he'll have "an heir of his own flesh and blood," just like God promised.

Furthermore, it establishes a relationship of ownership between the people and God, a sense that God is *ours* – not *yours*. And this has paved the way for levels of violence and pain that span from church splits to crusades, to attacks from terrorists on all sides – to shootings in New Zealand mosques just this week. Bad stories, especially bad sacred stories, warp our imagination and get innocent people killed.

But, hear me again: there is more than one way to read a story. As a matter of fact, in the spirit of Lent, it is sometimes crucial find a new way of reading a story, of letting the old ways die to lend their nutrients to the growth of something better.

Myths are necessary. They offer us identity and imagination, they are orienting, and they aren't going anywhere. But be that as it may, it is our responsibility to return to these myths, to the sacred stories for which we thank God every week, to return to them every so often with a critical eye. After all, they are testimonies of people's experiences with Mystery, with the Divine, handed down to us right along with all of the cultural and personal blind spots and biases still intact. It is our responsibility to read them through the lens of Christ, in the company of the Spirit, in the fellowship of discerning community. It is our responsibility to ask the questions: What kind of people does this myth show us how to be, and does that kind of person actually bear the fruits of the Spirit?

Lent seems an excellent time to do that. This is the season of death and rebirth, of composting and new growth. It's an excellent time to ask which parts of this story may need to die, and how might we tell it now, knowing what we know now of God revealed in Christ, to create a better myth that helps us imagine a better world?

With this task in mind, let me try telling that story again.

Once, when the world was much younger, all the world feared the gods. The tribes lived in fear that the forces beyond their control would bring calamity down upon them, and so responded with sacrifice and ritual to appease the irritable deities. They sought to do the bidding of the gods, lest the gods bring them suffering. All of the tribes, that is, except one.

Abram was afraid. It was true that he sat on top of the world, that he enjoyed a level of power that many before him and many since have only dreamed of tasting, but with no heir, with no child of his own to inherit his wealth or his power, his legacy would end with his death. Arms crossed, his long beard rested on his knees as he meditated on the futility of it all. But at that moment, his meditation was interrupted by a voice, almost a whisper in his ear, a nudging in his heart. "Don't be afraid, Abram" the voice spoke, though "voice" didn't seem the right word for what he was experiencing. It seemed to be at once both everywhere and nowhere. "As long as you remain with me," the voice continued, "you never have to fear meaninglessness or futility. You will know a kind of wealth that defies your imagination."

"But my Sovereign, my God!" Abram moaned, "what good is this 'wealth' you speak of if I have no one to leave it to? When we're gone, it will be like none of this ever happened!" He fixed his gaze firmly back on the ground.

If it was possible for the voice that wasn't a voice to chuckle, it did, and the sound of it melted any fear that tensed Abram's muscles. "Oh Abram," the voice reassured, "Come, set your mind on things above. You are allowing earthly, human ideas and fears to cloud your vision, but there is so much more at work. Look up, my beloved child, look at the stars."

Abram moved away from his tent and finally looked up, gazing into the velvety sky, full from one corner to the other with stars shining down on him, lighting up his world. His throat caught at the majesty of it all. "Count them, Abram," the voice said. "Count them if

you can! As many as that, you will have as descendants.” And Abram, in spite of himself, believed the voice, the tug at his heart. He relaxed into the arms he felt holding him like his mother’s once did. But then he caught himself. This is not how gods worked. He knew the stories. This god would want something from him, there would be some kind of exchange.

“Okay, alright,” Abram said, stiffening and coming back to his senses. “And what do you want in exchange? What must I do to know you’ll follow through on your end of the deal?”

His change of tone was met with a change in the voice. Now formally, all business, the voice asked Abram to bring forth animals for the covenant, to fulfill the custom of the region. The next day, Abram cut the animals in preparation and laid them out to create a path between them.

As he finished, the sun set, and the unnerving darkness of the night enveloped him. But then, lighting up the darkness, a flame broke forth. A torch and a smoking firepot blazed to life, elements which Abram knew signified the presence of the Divine. As the flames moved along the path between the animals, the voice made the same promises it had made before. When the flame reached the end of the path, Abram knew it was his turn. He moved forward to accept whatever terms the voice would put forward, but something stopped him. Something held him back. The flames went out, and the voice came to him as it had before, as a whisper in his ear. “No, no” it said. “There is no need for you to pass through.”

“I don’t understand,” Abram protested, confused. This was not how gods were supposed to work.

“The action is mine, and the promise is mine,” the voice explained. “I am at work in this world, re-creating and making all things new. I am alive and present in every heart, ready to blaze forth and animate them with my Spirit. But Abram, I am looking for partners. I promise to always be here, to always be going about this work, to always love you and every human and every thing without reservation or condition. That is my covenant. There is nothing you have to do to make this so, and nothing you could ever do that would make it less so. You may cover me up or lose sight of me in your fear, but I promise never to leave. That promise is mine, what is yours is the invitation. Will you join me, Abram, in this work? Together, we can begin a new thing in the world, start a new tribe born from this covenant, a tribe that will partner with me to re-create this world into the pattern of love. This tribe will blaze across the earth like the stars of the sky, illuminating, liberating from darkness, giving humanity bearings by which to go forth on its journey. Will you join me?”

As the ages passed, the Word of the Spirit came to fruition. The true heirs of Abram would go on to partner with the Spirit of Love, to allow it to shine through them and reveal all things to be beautiful and beloved. And now, today, you and I stand in this heritage. We shine among the stars Abram counted on that holy night.

*This is one of our sacred stories. Thanks be to God.*