

Are We There Yet?

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Sermon Series:

**Pathways: The Distance
Between the Promise and the
Present**

**Text: Genesis 15:1-18; Luke
13:31-35**

When I first considered this sermon series, as I was reading the Scripture passages that will take us through Lent, I had been thinking of the promises that God makes to us: the promise to Abram—to make him a great nation, so that he might be a blessing; the promise God makes to the Israelites—I will be your God, and you will be my people; the promise we receive in Jesus Christ—a new covenant, eternal life; and what is perhaps God’s biggest promise, in Revelation—a new heaven and a new earth, where the dwelling of God will be with us, he will wipe away every tear, and there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain.

These are big and wonderful promises indeed. But I had also been thinking about the present: a world in which nations seek to curse one another rather than bless; a culture in which we have become gods unto ourselves; a society that imprisons itself in injustice; and lives seemingly *full* of cancer, violence, illness, suffering—death and grief, tears and pain.

And I wondered about this Christian journey we are called to walk with Jesus—between the present and the promise, somehow embracing the reality of both, in order that we might be redeemed.

At the time, I had no way of knowing just how real that present would be, and how close to home. I could not have imagined devastating earthquakes in Haiti and Chile, or the smell of gunpowder mixing with the ashes of Lent. I could not have known the illness and grief that would touch the lives of people in this congregation—new diagnoses or news (“the cancer has spread”), old hurts, unknown illnesses, broken bones and broken relationships.

It is hard to believe, much less see, the promise, when we are bombarded with senseless violence, natural dis-

asters, and personal tragedies. And it is very, very easy to ask, “Are we there yet?” Enough is enough. We’re exhausted, we’re frightened, we’re confused—we wonder where the promise is, or even if it is.

Are we there yet?

It’s a question Abram himself asks.

The passage in Genesis continues a story that began three chapters earlier. God tells Abram to go, leave your people and your home, and go to the place I will show you. The Lord promises to make him a great nation, to bless him, so that he will be a blessing. And Abram goes—he takes his family, a few belongings, and he starts a journey.

Well two chapters, and several years later, Abram has yet to see the promise. In fact, right before this passage, Abram has just refused riches offered by a king, saying that he swore to the Lord he would not take this king’s reward.

We can see why then, at the beginning of this passage, when God steps in to reassure Abram (“Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward will be very great”), it is no wonder that Abram questions God.

Abram says “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus? You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my home is to be my heir.”

Now the word God uses to reassure Abram is “reward” and it means some sort of monetary compensation. But if you remember, that’s not what God promised Abram way back in Genesis 12—there God promised to make him into a great nation—to give him descendants, and land.

So Abram is somewhat right to be confused, if not a little indignant. In short he asks, “God, what you promised me was a family, and so

what sort of reward are we talking about here? Because I don’t see any children, and that’s the only thing worth something to me. And even if you did make me rich, what good would that do, if I have no heirs to pass it on to?”

Are we there yet?

But God takes Abram outside, and points up to the stars and says with good-natured generosity, “count them, if you are able—so shall your descendants be.”

This is an image beyond Abram’s ability to comprehend—he’s no more capable of counting the stars than we are—yet it’s what God promises. And if that weren’t amazing and wonderful enough, Abram believes him. Abram takes God at his word—at his unimaginable, incomprehensible, fantastic word.

Abram believes the impossible. Abram believes the promise.

But then, just like in a bad infomercial, God ups the ante: but wait, there’s more! “I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.”

And for Abram, who believes, this is too much. Now he asks for proof, “But how am I to *know* that I am to possess it?”

This is a great story, because it’s real. It would have been easy to leave it at Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness. In fact, we often do leave it there. Even the New Testament, which picks up this story in multiple places, stops there. Abram believed the Lord and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

But the difficulty lies somewhere between Abram’s belief and his circumstances. Abram believes the promise—and he has to believe it, to have faith, because it’s impossible for him to know, to comprehend this new world that is beyond comprehension. But Abram wants to know it too—he wants evidence. This does

not make Abram any less faithful.

How often do we, who believe, demand to know as well?

When we're asked to give something up, whether it's our time, our money, or just our way, and we want to know that what we're getting in return is worth it. We feel called to new directions, new ministries, but we want a guarantee of success before we take the first step.

Dealing in the known is comfortable and safe, dealing in God's realm of belief and possibilities can be frightening. Because belief is what you hope for and what you imagine, knowledge is what you experience and what you see.

And Abram wants to see. He wants proof. Just as we do. Abram believed the promise, but he still had to contend with the present.

Are we there yet?

God graciously responds to Abram by making a covenant, which comes across as a rather gruesome sounding ritual, but was a common tradition of the time—sacrificial animals were cut in two and each party to the covenant walked between the halves to seal the agreement. The Hebrew literally says that the parties “cut” a covenant, and if one party were not able to fulfill their obligation, they would forfeit their life, symbolized by the animal sacrifice.

Except this covenant is a bit different. While Abram sleeps, God walks the line. Unlike other covenants, Abram has no obligation really. This is God's unilateral, unconditional promise to Abram. This is God's covenant, and it is an amazing act of grace.

But Abram doesn't get let off the hook completely. Because God does give Abram proof, but it's probably not the answer he, nor we, are looking for.

God essentially says the proof, the present, will look for all the world as if the promise was never made. “*Know* this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years.” Only “afterward” says God, “will they come out with many possessions.”

The promise is to Abram, but it's not for Abram. It's not for him, not even for his children, or grandchildren, or great-grandchildren.

Abram will contend with the present, with the journey and the wandering, and his children will contend with struggle, and his grandchildren with violence, and his great-grandchildren with poverty, oppression, enslavement.

All for the sake of a promise to the next generation, a promise beyond their imagination.

The promise endures, but the road is not easy. And the key to the journey is to look ahead, not around. To walk based on what we believe, not what we know.

We, who also believe, forget to look ahead. We get distracted and discouraged by what we see around us. In the church, we pour time and energy and money into ministries that benefit other people, and we wonder if it's worth it. In our lives, we are confronted by illness (our own and our loved ones'), pain (physical and emotional), broken relationships, difficult relationships, and grief. And sometimes we wonder if that's all there is.

Are we there yet?

Jesus was continually confronted with discouraging, and even dangerous, circumstances not because of the present, but because of the promise. In the passage in Luke, Jesus has been preaching God's kingdom—the promise. He has been telling people he will not see them in his glory simply because

they ate with him or because he taught in their streets—proximity will not get you salvation. No, Jesus says, “the last will be first and the first will be last.”

That’s a pretty unimaginable promise—incomprehensible even, whether you’re the first or the last. But if you’re the first, the promise is threatening. The first, in this case, prefer the present—where they have power.

So we pick up today’s passage, where some Pharisees come to warn Jesus, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.”

We don’t know about these Pharisees, it could be they were sympathetic to Jesus, and had his best interest at heart. It could be they just wanted him to go away. Either way, they’re distracting him—trying to get him to focus on the present danger instead of the promised kingdom.

And it’s easy to get distracted, and to distract others. We don’t want to see our loved ones fail, so we discourage them from trying—we undermine their gifts. We worry that someone will be disappointed, so we don’t give them hope. We think we’re helping the church, but at the cost of stepping on the toes of those who we serve with. Or we’re worried there won’t be a place for us, and we discredit new ideas and the people who have them, by focusing on what could go wrong instead of what can go right.

But Jesus won’t be distracted. He brushes them off, saying “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.’” In short, I’m too busy dealing in the kingdom of God to be worried by something as unimportant as the kings of this world.

Jesus is faced with very real danger, yet he

continues his journey, even at risk of his life. “Today, tomorrow, and the next day, I must be on my way.”

But he will leave Jerusalem, a city so caught up in the present, that it cannot believe the promise. Jesus laments Jerusalem’s unwillingness to believe and exposes the irony of its short-sightedness, calling it “the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it.”

Stoning is the punishment for blasphemy. God’s promise such a threat to their present that the people of Jerusalem take it for a lie—a lie contrary to God’s will and character. This is a city, a whole population, a community, that has decided to believe what it knows—demons, sickness, tyranny—rather than trust what could be—God’s promise of holiness, wholeness, and peace.

Barbara Brown Taylor, an author and preacher, describes Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem this way:

“If you have ever loved someone you could not protect, then you understand the depth of Jesus’ lament. All you can do is open your arms. You cannot make anyone walk into them. Meanwhile, this is the most vulnerable posture in the world --wings spread, breast exposed --but if you mean what you say, then this is how you stand. ...

... Jesus won’t be king of the jungle in this or any other story. What he will be is a mother hen, who stands between the chicks and those who mean to do them harm. She has no fangs, no claws, no rippling muscles. All she has is her willingness to shield her babies with her own body. If the fox wants

them, he will have to kill her first; which he does, as it turns out. He slides up on her one night in the yard while all the babies are asleep. When her cry wakens them, they scatter. She dies the next day where both foxes and chickens can see her -- wings spread, breast exposed -- without a single chick beneath her feathers. It breaks her heart . . . but if you mean what you say, then this is how you stand.”¹

Jerusalem is not so far from us.

We prefer the ease of people who are like us and who agree with us—the demons of fear, but Jesus tells us the kingdom is for everyone and calls us to be vulnerable enough to give up my way for our way. We prefer to nurse old grudges and hang on to resentments—the sickness of anger, but Jesus calls us be vulnerable enough to ask for and to grant forgiveness. We cling to the way we’ve always done it—the tyranny of the past, but Jesus calls us to be vulnerable enough to see things and people in a new way.

Are we there yet?

Jesus weeps for Jerusalem, and he weeps for us. He leaves Jerusalem, lets them make their own bed and lie in it: “See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me again until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

Jesus leaves, but the promise endures.

This is a tragic bit of foreshadowing—Jesus will return to Jerusalem in the not too distant future to triumphant cheers of “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” We will celebrate this on Palm Sunday.

But less than one short week later, the very same crowd will call for his crucifixion.

Jesus will die at the hands of those he most hoped to save. God, who made the covenant that we broke, will give his life instead of demanding ours.

And the promise and the present will meet.

Because Jesus’ death is not the end of the story. Because it is on the *third* day that Jesus’ finishes his work—on the third day, when the promise meets the present in an empty tomb, on the road to Emmaus, in the breaking of bread, and in the community of the faithful.

Because of Christ, because of his life, his death, and most especially his resurrection, we don’t have to just believe—we *know*. We know because we have seen glimpses of the promise.

We stop worrying about our comfort and security enough to reach out to people who are different and to learn from them—and God casts out our fear. We stop focusing on our hurt long enough to extend the grace of forgiveness to the person who wronged us—and God grants us healing. We step out in faith in a new direction, giving up the sanctuary of the past—and God sets us free.

We know, like Abram, that the promise not only endures, but that it comes closer with each new day—that “afterward they shall come out with great possessions. . . they shall come back here in the fourth generation.”

The Christian music group Point of Grace, a very appropriate name in this case, sings about it:

“When nights are long/ Seems the dark has no end/
Still we walk on in light of the truth/
For waiting beyond/ Where the morning begins/
Is the dawn, and

your mercy anew/ Oh, to believe we're
alive in your love/ There is so much to
see/ If we keep looking up/ You fill the
heavens with hope and a higher love/ A
picture, a promise for life”²

²“Blue Skies,” Point of Grace. Album: Free to Fly, May 2001.

When the people of faith stop looking
around, and start looking ahead, we greet the
promise of God’s new day dawning upon us.

When Abram looks around, he sees a barren
wife, a barren land, and a barren coffer—and
what he knows is that his children will see toil,
slavery, oppression, and suffering. But when
he looks ahead, and God assures him he will
“go to his ancestors in peace,” in spite of all of
that.

Because of the promise—because he be-
lieves.

When Jesus looks around, he sees a fearful
people clinging to a broken world—and he
knows that he will see betrayal, anguish, afflic-
tion, and death. But when he looks ahead,
and God brings his salvation to bear through
all of that.

Because of the promise—because he lives.

When we look around, we see senseless
violence, natural disasters, financial melt-
downs—and we know that we will see grief,
illness, fear, and pain. But we look ahead, be-
cause we’ve seen the promise in our midst.
We sang about it this morning, and we’ll sing it
every Sunday in Lent: “Because thy promise I
believe, O Lamb of God, I come, I come!”

Because of the promise—because we know.
And because we believe. And so we come.

Are we there yet? No, but God is. And God
is meeting us on the way.

¹“As A Hen Gathers Her Brood,” Barbara Brown Taylor. Christian Cen-
tury, Feb. 25, 1986, p. 201.