

Sermon for March 17, 2019
“God is our Shield”

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

I think often times we put the people we read about in the Bible up on a pedestal. We think of them as larger than life. After all God talks with them and walks with them and God performed great miracles for them. We imagine them as people of tremendous faith. They're not like us. We are ordinary people. We doubt too much, and when was the last time God spoke to you out of a burning bush or parted an ocean for you. And so the people of the Bible, especially the Old Testament, like Abraham and Sarah seem distant and strange; not like the people we are and know.

But they were more like us than you think. They were just ordinary people. They were capable of great sin as well as great faith. Does that sound like us? God didn't always speak to them out of a burning bush. Sometimes God spoke through a quiet voice.

Abraham is the best example of the point I am making. He was no great preacher or prophet or king or great warrior or theologian. He was a shepherd, plain and simple.

Abraham was an ordinary man with ordinary problems. For one he had no children. Why was this a problem? I told you that Abraham was like people today, but there is one important exception. Abraham's religion was much more incomplete than ours. He lacked the understanding of God that we take for granted. For instance, Abraham didn't even have the ten commandments. All he had was a relationship with God, and God told him to do things, but that was it. One of the things Abraham didn't know was that there is an afterlife.

Because Abraham apparently didn't know about life after death, he was particularly worried about not having children. Without children he would have no heirs. All that he had worked for would have to be willed to one of his servants. He thought his only chance for immortality was to have children to carry on his name and the family business. To Abraham, with his limited understanding, a death with no children to carry on was the end.

So Abraham was worried. You have heard of a mid life crisis when a person reaches middle age and they wonder what they have accomplished in life. Well Abraham was in his 80's so I guess he was having a late life crisis. He had done many things. He had gone where God had commanded him. He had a wonderful wife and a thriving business. But what would happen to it all. And he thought, "If only I had a child to pass all this on to."

Then something happened that is very characteristic of the way God acts. In the midst of Abraham's despair God came to him to comfort him. God spoke to Abraham and said: "Don't worry Abraham, I will take care of you. You have been faithful to me all these years and I will reward you." Abraham replied, "O Lord, I know you mean well, but what can you do. I am old and I have no children. All that I have will be left to my hired hand Eliazer." God said, "Eliazer will not inherit all this. Your own son will." Then God took Abraham outside and showed him the stars, and God said, "Your descendants will be as many as the stars." Abraham believed him and God considered him righteous because of his faith.

But God doesn't stop with just taking away our fears, our Heavenly Father also provides for our future. So, God did the same with Abraham. After promising Abraham more descendants than he could count, God said, "I will give you all this land." Without thinking Abraham said, "But how can this be? How can I be sure all this will come true?" God said, "Meet me tomorrow night with a heifer, a lamb, a goat, and two birds and I will show you how sincere I am."

Abraham may have doubted, but he had enough faith to meet God as he had been commanded. And Abraham brought the livestock and he prepared them as God had commanded and he waited. First vultures began trying to eat the dead animals. And Abraham had to chase them off. These were a gift for God, he couldn't let the birds ruin them.

Then the sun started to set, and Abraham began to worry. He was tired. Not just tired for the night; that he wanted to sleep for the night. He was old and tired; he was about ready to sleep for good. The sun was not just setting for the day, it was setting on his life. His only hope was God's promises. And where was God? Had God forgotten or decided not to keep the promise. Not only were the surroundings getting darker, but so was Abraham's soul.

Finally, when it could get no darker God appeared. In the form of a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch God appeared and passed between the halves of the slaughtered animals. And that day God sealed the promise to Abraham and made a statement. In the symbolic language of the 20th century B.C. God said, "If I break my promises may I split open like these animals."

Abraham was an ordinary man with ordinary problems. He was much like us. We worry about our future. What will happen to me, what will become of all I have done. Who will take care of me? What will happen when... Fill in the blank with one of your fears. Like Abraham many of us have followed God for years, yet we still wonder and worry, but as with Abraham, God speaks to us and reminds us that the Almighty will take care of us. And God promises to take away our fears and provide for us beyond our concern. And God says, "Just meet me and I will show you how sincere I am."

So we come to meet God, but it is getting late. There is not much time: to have children, to have successes, to find hope, to pass on the faith. The sun is setting and it's getting dark. And where is God. Has God abandoned us, will he leave us here to fight off the vulture until we can no more and they feed on us?

I know it's getting dark. But just wait. Hang on. God hasn't let you down before and God will not let you down now. Just when the sun has set and you think it can't get any darker. Just when you are tired of fighting off the vultures and detractors. Then God will come, with the fire of the Holy Spirit, and our Lord will show you how serious an Almighty God can be.

Wait a minute! How do I know that God is serious about keeping the promise to save us? I know God is serious because of the way God sealed the promise. God sealed the promise to Abraham by passing between the slaughtered animals. God symbolically said, "May I split apart and die like these animals, if I break my promise." God sealed our promise by coming in his Son to die on a cross for my sins. Hey, that's serious! If God takes my fears and my life that seriously, then I can trust God's promises.