



Complain, Complain, Complain – Touchpoint for March 9, 2022

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18 - The Message - After all these things, this word of God came to Abram in a vision: “Don’t be afraid, Abram. I’m your shield. Your reward will be grand!” Abram said, “God, Master, what use are your gifts as long as I’m childless and Eliezer of Damascus is going to inherit everything?” Abram continued, “See, you’ve given me no children, and now a mere house servant is going to get it all.”

Then God’s Message came: “Don’t worry, he won’t be your heir; a son from your body will be your heir.” Then he took him outside and said, “Look at the sky. Count the stars. Can you do it? Count your descendants! You’re going to have a big family, Abram!” And he believed! Believed God! God declared him “Set-Right-with-God.”

God continued, “I’m the same God who brought you from Ur of the Chaldees and gave you this land to own.” Abram said, “Master God, how am I to know this, that it will all be mine?” God said, “Bring me a heifer, a goat, and a ram, each three years old, and a dove and a young pigeon.” He brought all these animals to him, split them down the middle, and laid the halves opposite each other. But he didn’t split the birds. Vultures swooped down on the carcasses, but Abram scared them off. As the sun went down a deep sleep overcame Abram and then a sense of dread, dark and heavy.

When the sun was down and it was dark, a smoking firepot and a flaming torch moved between the split carcasses. That’s when God made a covenant with Abram: “I’m giving this land to your children, from the Nile River in Egypt to the River Euphrates in Assyria...”

Grace and peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

Abram said, “God, Master, what use are your gifts as long as I’m childless and Eliezer of Damascus is going to inherit everything?” Abram continued, “See, you’ve given me no children, and now a mere house servant is going to get it all.”

I’m getting tired these days. How about you? I did a devotion for our Board meeting a couple of weeks ago. I used Psalm 13, “How Long O Lord ... How Long?”

I know I shouldn’t complain. I know it doesn’t do any good. But I find myself doing it more and more, and liking myself less and less.

So when I read the Genesis passage for this week, I kind of jumped on it. Me and Abram are simpatico on this one. From one complainer to another... maybe misery does love company.

A little context for the Genesis passage:

We first meet Abram and Sarai at the end of Genesis 11. And it is interesting to note that in a creation teeming with life, and in which God’s first command to people was to “be fruitful and multiply,” Sarai is the first person to be mentioned as “childless” in the Bible.

Secondly, according to the narrative of Genesis, the Lord has a problem. Having scattered people into many nations with many languages so that people would not understand each other, God now has to figure out how to get God’s message across to everyone. So the Lord decides to choose one people to become a “priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6) ... a nation through which the Lord might bless all the other nations.

And in typical divine fashion, the Lord chooses a most unlikely couple -- an aging, childless couple -- to become the ancestors of this priestly, blessing nation:

“The Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’” (Genesis 12:1-3)

And so, Abram and Sarai went. They journeyed to the land. They waited for a child -- a child who would become the first of their many descendants, who would in turn become a great nation, blessed to be a blessing -- but no child.

Time passed. They went to Egypt. They came back. No child.

They became prosperous, even **wealthy**. No child.

Their nephew Lot separated from them. Lot was captured. Lot was rescued.

And still, no child. And then, finally, the Lord broke the silence.

The first words of Genesis 15 are, “After these things” ... and after a great deal of time ... “the Lord spoke to Abram in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid.’”

In the Bible, the words “do not be afraid” contain an additional meaning, “You are about to hear good news.” It always follows “Do not be afraid.”

And what was the good news the Lord spoke? “I am your shield; your reward will be very great.” The best way to translate the phrase would be, “What you will receive will be very great.”

To put it all together: “Good news, Abram! You are going to get something totally awesome!”

This is a second promise from the Lord! That should be worth something, right?

Well, Abram wasn’t quite so impressed.

What is Abram’s response to the Lord’s second promise? Complaining!

“What good are you and your promises?”

Abram, a man after my own heart.

And I want to scream out in support to Abram, “I’m right behind you Abram! I’ve got your back.” (Well, not exactly ‘right behind you’... maybe a few paces back... behind a bush or tree... in case God decides to strike you with lightning for complaining.)

Rather than praising God for this new promise, Abram cried out in pain regarding the deepest hurt and unfulfilled hope in his life: He and Sarai were still childless. *“God, Master, what use are your gifts as long as I’m childless and Eliezer of Damascus is going to inherit everything? See, you’ve given me no children, and now a mere house servant is going to get it all.”*

Abram’s lament is personal, full of poignant, symbolic language. Abram basically says, “Why should I listen to you? I still have no child.” He’s already prosperous and wealthy, as we know from Genesis 13-14. Abram doesn’t need any more stuff. The term “son of my house” means a slave -- one who comes not from one’s body, but is part of the stone of the house.

What Abram desires so deeply is an heir, an “offspring.” He wants a progeny. A continuation of creation **through** himself, not **in spite of** himself!

Abram is looking inside himself, into the deepest hurts and hope of his body.

And in his pain, he accuses God and reminds God of the divine promises in Genesis 12:

“YOU HAVE GIVEN ME NO CHILDREN!”

And so, Abram is stuck in his lament, his complaint. And I know exactly how he feels... stuck in lament, complaint.

Now before continuing with the story, a word about the power of lament. In the Bible, God does not desire followers who are meek and mild, compliant and quiet, at least not in relationship to God. God wants sufferers who fight back. God invites us to own and be in touch with the deepest hurts and brightest hopes in our souls. For Abram, this hope was to have a child. And after all, the Lord had promised.

And so it is with us. We are not to hide our deepest hurts and brightest hopes, but hold them up, hold them out...

... to the One who holds all.

Now at first, that can be scary. After all, how will God respond to attacks that suggest the Lord hasn't been faithful? How will God respond to an angry servant who reminds God of certain unkept promises?

How does God respond to complaints that border on the aggressive?

God responds by renewing the promise of many descendants. In fact, God responds by expanding the promise!

“Don't worry, he won't be your heir; a son from your body will be your heir.” ... “Look at the sky. Count the stars. Can you do it? Count your descendants! You're going to have a big family, Abram!”

As many descendants as there are stars! As there are galaxies!

Abram had looked inside himself, and gotten in touch with his deepest buried hurts and hopes.

The Creator responded by telling Abram to look up! To gaze outside of himself to the heavens that the Lord had created. And then God renewed the promise and expanded on it, and Abram believed and went on his way.

Now it would be nice to say that from this point on Abram was an exemplary saint who never did anything wrong and lived happily ever after. But he didn't. And he continued to have struggles and joys, defeats and victories.

So what should we take from all of this?

Perhaps this:

God doesn't mind being involved in our problems. In fact God welcomes it. Our problems are God's problems. Prayer is in part a way of speaking to God that involves God in our daily lives. And in prayer, we remind God that God has promised to be faithful to being 'Immanuel' (God with us).

So lament, complain. Put it all out there for God to hear. Do you really think your complaints are going to make God angry? We killed God's son, after all -- hung him on a cross -- and you know what he said, "Father, forgive them."

I think God can handle our complaining.

So lament, complain. Put it all out there for God to hear... but then, if I may make a suggestion... take time to listen.

Take time to listen, and to hear again the promises of God. To be with you in joy and sorrow, complaint and celebration, life and death.

For this is the journey God has chosen to take as well ... from the manger of Bethlehem to the cross of Calvary. A journey of hope and healing, as well as pain and suffering. And even Jesus cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

So lament, complain. Put it all out there for God to hear. You won't be the first, or the last. You'll just be following in the footsteps of Abraham.

Abraham, an example of faith, not just in his believing but in his lamenting as well.

Amen.

Spirit in the Desert

Opening Songs

Be Still

(The London Fox Taize Choir)

Be Still, know that I am God

Create in Me

(The Concordia Choir)

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence and take not the holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation and uphold me with thy free spirit.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

See Him

(Keith Duke)

See him: 1) silent and lifeless. 2) alone and forlorn 3) broken and helpless...Crowned with a garland of thorns 4) as son and as brother 5) related to all 6) through the grief of a mother...hurting the most of all 7) as healer and teacher 8) as helper and friend 9) as prophet and preacher...

Ignore Him??? I doubt if you can.

The Meal

The Lord's Prayer

(“Our Father”, Taize Reflections)

Benediction

Gaelic Blessing/Deep Peace **(John Rutter, The Cambridge Singers)**

Deep peace of the running wave to you. Deep peace of the flowing air to you.

Deep peace of the quiet earth to you. Deep peace of the shining stars to you.

Deep peace of the gentle night to you. Moon and stars pour their healing light on you.

Deep peace of Christ, of Christ the light of the world to you.

Deep peace of Christ to you.