

Genesis 15

15 After these events, the Lord's word came to Abram in a vision, "Don't be afraid, Abram. I am your protector. Your reward will be very great."

2 But Abram said, "Lord God, what can you possibly give me, since I still have no children? The head of my household is Eliezer, a man from Damascus."**3** He continued, "Since you haven't given me any children, the head of my household will be my heir."

4 The Lord's word came immediately to him, "This man will not be your heir. Your heir will definitely be your very own biological child."**5** Then he brought Abram outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars if you think you can count them." He continued, "This is how many children you will have."**6** Abram trusted the Lord, and the Lord recognized Abram's high moral character.

7 He said to Abram, "I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land as your possession."

8 But Abram said, "Lord God, how do I know that I will actually possess it?"

9 He said, "Bring me a three-year-old female calf, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a dove, and a young pigeon."**10** He took all of these animals, split them in half, and laid the halves facing each other, but he didn't split the birds. **11** When vultures swooped down on the carcasses, Abram waved them off. **12** After the sun set, Abram slept deeply. A terrifying and deep darkness settled over him... **17** After the sun had set and darkness had deepened, a smoking vessel with a fiery flame passed between the split-open animals. **18** That day the Lord cut a covenant with Abram: "To your descendants I give this land, from Egypt's river to the great Euphrates."

Psalms 27

The Lord is my light and my salvation.

Should I fear anyone?

The Lord is a fortress protecting my life.

Should I be frightened of anything?

2 When evildoers come at me trying to eat me up—
it's they, my foes and my enemies,
who stumble and fall!

3 If an army camps against me,
my heart won't be afraid.

If war comes up against me,
I will continue to trust in this:

4 I have asked one thing from the Lord—
it's all I seek:
to live in the Lord's house all the days of my life,
seeing the Lord's beauty
and constantly adoring his temple.

5 Because he will shelter me in his own dwelling
during troubling times;
he will hide me in a secret place in his own tent;
he will set me up high, safe on a rock.

6 Now my head is higher than the enemies surrounding me,
and I will offer sacrifices in God's tent—

sacrifices with shouts of joy!
I will sing and praise the Lord.
7 Lord, listen to my voice when I cry out—
have mercy on me and answer me!
8 Come, my heart says, seek God's face. [a]
Lord, I do seek your face!
9 Please don't hide it from me!
Don't push your servant aside angrily—
you have been my help!
God who saves me,
don't neglect me!
Don't leave me all alone!
10 Even if my father and mother left me all alone,
the Lord would take me in.
11 Lord, teach me your way;
because of my opponents, lead me on a good path.
12 Don't give me over to the desires of my enemies,
because false witnesses and violent accusers
have taken their stand against me.
13 But I have sure faith
that I will experience the Lord's goodness
in the land of the living!
14 Hope in the Lord!
Be strong! Let your heart take courage!
Hope in the Lord!

Luke 13:31-35

³¹ At that time, some Pharisees approached Jesus and said, "Go! Get away from here, because Herod wants to kill you."

³² Jesus said to them, "Go, tell that fox, 'Look, I'm throwing out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will complete my work. ³³ However, it's necessary for me to travel today, tomorrow, and the next day because it's impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.'

³⁴ "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those who were sent to you! How often I have wanted to gather your people just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. But you didn't want that. ³⁵ Look, your house is abandoned. I tell you, you won't see me until the time comes when you say, *Blessings on the one who comes in the Lord's name.*"[\[a\]](#)

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

This passage from Genesis 15 might be my favorite passage in Scripture. Of course I know and believe that all of Scripture is God's Word spoken to us and recorded by faithful but imperfect human authors, so playing favorites isn't always the best idea. But I also know that at certain

times, certain parts of the Bible speak in ways that we need to hear, speak certain truths that other Scriptures don't communicate in the same way. In other words, when I say this is my favorite, it's likely my favorite only for a time. I also love the Christ hymn in Philippians 2, the poetic story of Creation in Genesis 1, the call to justice, righteousness, and mercy in Amos 5, Jesus' exorcism of the Syrophenician girl in Matthew 15...but I digress.

The reason I love this story in Genesis 15 might be because I grew up with a butcher as a father. The idea of splitting animals in this way isn't foreign to my life experience since I'm someone who's first job wasn't just bagging groceries, but preparing the meat for sale, not just seeing how the sausage is made, but making it. This was hard, and messy work, but it was also holy work for our family. Helping to feed people with quality, locally raised, affordable

products was something that my dad, uncle, and grandparents before them found incredibly life-giving.

For Abram, this is even more life-giving. What we might not know is that, in ancient cultures, this is how you would write contracts between people making treaties. This is where the term cutting a covenant or cutting a contract finds its origin, because you would cut these animals in two and make a path between them. And trust me, as someone who's worked in a butcher shop, this is just as messy as you imagine it would be. Once you've agreed on the principles of the promises you make to one another, you walk through this path, literally passing through death, as a sign that said, "If I ever break my promise to you, may I be broken in two. You have the right to tear me apart if I fail to keep my part of this covenant." Abram doesn't just get bored in the wilderness; instead, creating this painful path is quite

purposeful. It's meant to reveal the importance of the covenant God and Abram make with one another.

Except, notice one thing. Only God walks this path of covenant. God doesn't force Abram to make the same journey, doesn't expect Abram can keep the same promise, and so only God is bound by this covenant. God takes not just the divine side of the covenant, but the consequences of our failure as well. God's telling Abram, God is telling us, "if I'm not faithful to you, may I be ripped to shreds, but I know you're not able to be faithful, and I don't want your destruction, so I'll keep the promise for both of us, for all of us. Whatever happens, grace is the first and last word."

In this season of Lent, this season of fasting, we might look at this a different way. In this moment, as the smoking pot and a flame walk through this path of promise alone, God is fasting from condemnation, from anger, from

judgement against Abram. Often, when we think of fasting, we think of refusing food. This makes sense, since the origins of fasting involved limiting food intakes for periods of time. Sometimes it would be all food during daylight hours. At other times, it would be refusing certain foods considered rich or indulgent for a certain period of time. That's where the origins of our Shrove Tuesday pancake traditions arose, trying to get all the butter, eggs, and sugar out of the house before Lenten fasts started. We often see this now in practices like giving up chocolates and desserts. At still other times, a fast might include giving up particular substances that are allowable but not necessary for life. Refusing tobacco, alcohol, or caffeine for a time is a fast often undertaken that helps to contextualize our reliance on other things instead of God. Giving up that cup of coffee in the morning, that cigarette on break, or that drink when you get home for a period of time might create some space to

rely on God in that time instead, might allow our Lord to surprise us and comfort us in new ways.

But there's a wider scope to fasting that includes much more than refusing to put things in your body for a time. Traditionally, people have fasted from sex during certain time periods. People have fasted from other activities as well, whether choosing to not spend time on Facebook to avoid the potential dramas of social media, or choosing not to watch television to allow time for more physical activities. You can fast from all sorts of things. Even decisions.

What do I mean by that? Well, you can't fast from emotions. You can't force yourself to stop feeling happy or angry hungry. But you can choose how you respond to those feelings. You can decide to act differently when certain emotions arise. For instance, I can't stop myself from wanting any combination of chocolate with caramel, peanut butter, or toffee when I walk through the aisles at

the grocery store. But I can choose not to act on those feelings, to refuse the connected impulse. Despite the beautiful deliciousness of Heath Bars and Butterfingers and Caramello, I can choose to fast from indulging those desires, from letting those emotions control me.

In the same way, when God alone walks through these broken bodies, the covenantal promise is this: God will fast from judgment. That doesn't mean that our failure, our sin, our brokenness won't affect God, won't grieve God, or won't anger God – they surely do – but instead of acting out of those emotions, God chooses to fast from acting in anger, from acting in grief. When we screw up, when we fall apart, God won't hold us accountable for that. Instead, God alone takes that responsibility.

This piece of Genesis 15 offers us a glimpse of grace, an early commitment to the love we see on the cross, thousands of years before Christ walked the earth. Long

before God became human, grace was God's first and final decision. Rather than act out of anger, God instead chose to act in compassion. Rather than act out of condemnation, God chose to act in forgiveness.

This offers us two things as children of God. First, it tells us the Gospel truth, that despite our faults – and surely we have faults – we're not doomed to the fate of these animals. We're not destined to be torn apart. God's answer for our brokenness isn't more brokenness. Instead, God chooses to make us whole again, to redeem us, to value us, to love us, to restore us to that place of belovedness. Even when we don't deserve it, God chooses love for us, the children of our Lord, the creatures of our Creator.

And from that, as those who carry God's image, the likeness we're called to share is also a fasting from condemnation. We can't stop feeling the anger that bubbles within us. We can't stop knowing the shame that

whispers too loud within our ears. We can't hide from the fear that blocks our path to wholeness. But we can, along with the Holy Spirit who lives and works within us, choose to act differently, choose not to act on those feelings of condemnation but instead to become actors of compassion, to become liverers of grace.

And here's the thing. Fasting from condemnation allows us to live in compassion both with ourselves and with others. We're not called to live with grace just toward those outside of us, but to ourselves as well. The question before us isn't just whether we'll offer forgiveness to those who've hurt us in our lives, though that's surely a part of it. The other question is whether we'll offer grace to ourselves when we feel anger or shame because of how we've managed to hurt others, how we've managed to hurt ourselves.

And that's important for everybody. We can't forgive others if we can't forgive ourselves. Not truly. We can't

receive God's forgiveness if we can't offer it to ourselves. Not really. God's choice to fast from judgment is ultimately a choice of identity. It's not just about choosing to act without condemnation, about making forgiving choices. It's about becoming forgiving people. Instead of dwelling in brokenness, this is about building a home on the foundation of this divine forgiveness that reshapes who we are

Lent offers us this opportunity to fast not just from things like soda or Netflix that we can take up again at a later point. We're not just called to fast from good things and learn to rely upon God's greater goodness. We're also called to fast from things like condemnation, like judgment, things that we should never take up again, whether against others or ourselves. We're called to fast from the things that are killing us, and to leave them behind forever. In this way, we learn to become more like Christ, to create new habits that reflect the image of God in the world. This is a fast

entirely different, and yet entirely beautiful. Think of a life full of choices shaped not by judgment, not by shame or fear or hatred, but by grace, by love, by compassion. Fasting from those things that keep us from being truly ourselves as we're created to be, so that we become more like Christ every single day. That's a fast to which we're called not just in Lent, but in all times. Amen.