

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

¹ After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." ² But Abram said, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" ³ And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." ⁴ But the word of the Lord came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir." ⁵ He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." ⁶ And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Then he said to him, "I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess." ⁸ But he said, "O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" ⁹ He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." ¹⁰ He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. ¹¹ And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

¹² As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.

¹⁷ When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. ¹⁸ On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates,

Last Sunday, Don and I did what we do most Sunday afternoons during NASCAR season, we relaxed and watched the Cup race. The race was in Phoenix, Arizona. At this track, the start/finish line is located near a portion of the track called the dogleg. an extension of track that makes it wider. There is a yellow line separating the dogleg from the regular track. One of the rules of NASCAR at this track is that during restarts, drivers cannot go below the yellow line during a restart until after they go past the start/finish line. If a driver does go below the line at the restart, the driver is supposed to be penalized, moving them back further in the pack of drivers.

At one of the restarts early in the race, driver Joey Lagano, was one of the two drivers at the front of the pack. He was on the inside starting spot at the front of the line. Joey drove below the yellow line at the wrong time. It was not an egregious crossing of the line, but it was definitely a crossing of the line; and so, Joey was given a penalty.

Debates about about NASCAR's call and about the impact the penalty had on Joey's race. I thought about this as an illustration for this morning's message because: 1. Joey crossed a line that broke a rule of NASCAR, and 2. The debates that ensued after the incident created division among NASCAR fans.

The implication for this incident is simple, drawing a line in the sand results in division. We have a tendency in the world to make many issues into an "us vs. them" competition. Lines have been drawn in the sand in politics, religions (including biblical interpretations within denominations and worship styles), racial and economic prejudices. I could go on and on with examples, but I think you get the point.

We draw those lines in the sand and attach to the different sides stereotypes and false assumptions, creating brokenness of relationships and hindering opportunities for doing good. Taking a black vs. white stand on any issue can be a way of passing judgment on each other, and we are warned in the Bible that it is not our job to judge one another. In Matthew 7:1-5, we read that Jesus taught, *"Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye;' and look, a plank is in your own eye. Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."*

We are not supposed to judge others, but God has no such limitations, and the story of Scripture is the story about how God is distinct from humans, but also a story about how God makes distinctions between those humans based on their responses to God. There are those who are faithful and those who are not. There also is grace and hope.

The scripture from Genesis that was read a few moments ago gives us an example of faithfulness through the story of Abram. Abram, we learn was a man faithful of God; but that's not to say that he did not have those moments when his faith was challenged.

In Chapter 12 of Genesis, God tells 75-year-old Abram, which was his name until God changed it to Abraham later in time, to pack up all his things, his family, his workers, everything, and move out to a place where God would lead him. God promised Abram that if he was obedient, Abram would be blessed and become a great nation, and other nations would be blessed through his descendants.

Now, if Abram was to have any descendants God's promise would need to include a miracle. Sarai, his wife, was far beyond childbearing age, and had never been able to conceive. How would it be possible for Abram to have descendants if he did not have his own children? But we are not told that Abram questioned God about this at that time. He just packed up and did as God instructed.

In Genesis 12:7 we find the entourage traveled quite some distance and God appeared to Abram again and said, "I will give this land before you to your children." At that very spot then, Abram built an altar to God, but still did not question God about how he would have descendants if he had no children. God never did give Abram a timeline, God simply commanded Abram to take a risk, to step out in faith, into a future he could not see clearly.

With faith in God, Abram was obedient to God's command. It was not without some difficulties along the way; even so he kept walking, to where he did not know yet. His trust in God to keep His promises carried Abram through the difficulties; although Abram still did not handle all of the difficulties they encountered wisely. Fortunately, and this is key, God was forgiving along the way.

By the time we get to chapter fifteen of Genesis, we see that Abram's beginning to have some second thoughts about whether God will keep His promises. Abram was doing his part by doing what God asked him to do, yet Abram and Sarai remained childless. He questioned God about this delay in Sarai bearing a child.

How did God respond to Abram's questioning? God did not respond with immediate action or with illumination on a timeline. God simply reaffirms his promise to Abram. God directs Abram's attention to the sky and challenges him to count the stars. God told Abram as he looked at the stars, "So shall your offspring be." *This may be understood as God telling Abram that he would have lots and lots and lots of descendants. But God was making another point too.*

God was also making the point that if He could make all of those stars, God can still give Abram a son. God is that great! God can do anything!

So, once again, God does not reveal his timeline to Abram. In spite of this omission, Abram again believed and trusted God to keep his word. God credited Abram with being a righteous man, a man working out his relationship with God and in doing so, strengthened it. **Notice**, God was **not** saying Abram was a righteous man because he was doing everything perfectly and never had any doubts. He was righteous because, with faith, he worked on his relationship with God, one step at a time.

"We too can strengthen our relationship with God by trusting God. Our outward actions such as church attendance, prayer, and good deeds will not by themselves make us right with God. A right relationship is based on faith – the heartfelt inner confidence that God is who he says he is and does what he says he will do. Right actions will follow naturally as by-products." (Life Application Bible)

Another sign of faithfulness is living with hope. God rewards those who live and serve within the tension of hopefulness. In this story the reward is not a prize earned but a special recognition given to a faithful servant of God who performs bold or risky services. Abraham and Sarah were called to live their lives against barrenness. The "reward," the land which they were to inherit, required them to live as creatures of hope in a situation of hopelessness, the situation of hopelessness being their current reality that they had no offspring to inherit the land God was giving them. That was a pretty big deal back then. Everyone counted on having offspring to whom they could pass on an inheritance.

God makes the distinction between those who are willing to take risks and serve him, all the while remaining hopeful about what will come; , and those who say, "forget it, things are not happening fast enough and things are not going according to my plans, so forget it, I will do things my way and be satisfied quicker." God rewards those serving with hope with a reward that is everlasting; while those who go it alone receive only a temporary good feeling that they essentially gave themselves.

A sign of faithfulness is trusting that God keeps all of his promises. God reaffirmed his promise with Abram in chapter 15. God told Abram to prepare things for a sort of "sealing the deal" ritual. No one is really sure of the significance of the animals used and the splitting of all the animals except the birds, but what we do understand is that through this ritual, God wants Abram to be assured that he will keep his promises to Abram , which God did indeed do.

There was one promise that God made and kept that has a huge impact on our lives. God promised the world that one day a Messiah would come to save us all and indeed God kept that promise, the Messiah did come in the man Jesus. It is because of him that we know more about God and about how God wants us to live. It is because of him and the unbelievable sacrifice of his life that he made for us, that we are saved from our own sin. Jesus through the presence of the Holy Spirit is the one person we can trust to help us be in that group that God knows as the faithful ones. That's the group we all want to be in, isn't it?

We all have been promised, also, that Jesus will one day return for God's faithful children. We know not the year, day, or time. We don't know whether it will happen as some huge world event or as a personal journey from this lifetime to the next. Brothers and sisters, we don't need to know. All we need to know is that God keeps his promises, therefore we want to live faithfully, always working out our relationship with God, so that when the Lord fulfills his promise for each of us, we will be with him in his glory for all of eternity.

Is there a line in the sand for Christians? Yes, and the line is actually called at its basic level, faithfulness to God. The line is not judgement, especially not for us to use as a tool for prejudice or a weapon to justify unloving, unforgiving, disrespectful attitudes and behaviors that misguide and break the spirits of others.

Perhaps, the line is an evaluation tool for our faithfulness and obedience to God. It's a voice calling you to those things that bring us closer to God and understanding God's Word and will. It's a place of opportunity to meet with others who we don't see eye to eye with and through listening, dialogue and acts of kindness, be Christ to them. It's not to be used as a tool to dig trenches of division. Jesus, when on the cross, has shown us how love above all else turns people to God. Forgive them, he said, and one by one, unbelievers crossed the line into faithfulness. "Surely, this man was the Son of God." Jesus, take me into your kingdom," and Jesus told the dying man that surely, he would.

The line of faithfulness directs our attention to God, who is forever faithful to us, as he was to Abram, even when Abram failed. Yes, the line, faithfulness, is being watched by God. He always knows where we are in reference to it, not so he pounce on us with a penalty, or worse. God does not delight in our absence from him. He watches the line, and should we wander from God, he seeks to make us aware of the door open to us, where with outstretched arms and love God wants to help us return to him, where the promised land of hope, love, peace, and joy is found in this lifetime and in the lifetime to come. That's what God wants for us. Amen.