

Genesis 15:1-6; Genesis 21:1-7

Romans 4:13 – 5:11

June 14, 2020

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

GOD’S WORD IS GOD’S BOND

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Years ago, Frederick Buechner began his sermon “Message in the Stars” with these questions: “If God really exists, why in Heaven’s name does God not prove that he exists instead of leaving us here in our terrible uncertainty? Why does he not show his face so that at least a despairing world can have hope?” He then said “And I have wondered sometimes what would happen if God were to do just that. What would happen if God did set about demonstrating his existence in some dramatic and irrefutable way?”

Buechner imagined how it might play out. One random night, God would rearrange the Milky Way and use the stars and planets to spell out in light year tall letters a message such as “I REALLY EXIST” or “GOD IS.” Think about the reactions: some people would fall to their knees; some people would flee into their houses in terror; some people would immediately begin to question how they had lived their lives; some people would have their hope strengthened, some their hope restored; preachers and theologians might feel vindicated or, better yet, realize their talk about God had turned into so many words and concepts over the years. Buechner imagined that churches would have to move into gigantic football stadiums to seat all the people. Wars would end and crime would decrease. The world would be a different place.

Night after night, year after year, God would write the message in the stars. He might vary it from time to time, write the message in different languages, accompanied by heavenly lights and music. This would go on until, as he puts it, “finally the last hardened skeptic would be convinced that God must indeed exist after all.”

But how does the story end? One night a child is standing with his father looking at the celestial display, when he turns and asks, “So what if God exists? What difference does *that* make?” In that instant, the heavenly message would fade away — or not! Perhaps it would remain in the sky for years to come. Either way, Buechner sadly concludes, “it would no longer make any difference.”

And why wouldn’t it make any difference any more? Buechner preached, “We all want to be certain, we all want proof, but the kind of proof that we tend to want — scientifically or philosophically demonstrable proof that would silence all doubts once and for all — would not in the long run, I think answer the fearful depths of our need at all. For what we need to know, of course, is not just that God exists, not just that beyond the steely brightness of the stars there is a cosmic intelligence of some kind that keeps the whole show going, but that there is a God right here in the thick of our day-by-day lives who may not be writing messages about himself in the stars but who in one way or another is trying to get messages through our blindness as we move around down here

knee-deep in the fragrant muck and misery and marvel of the world. It is not objective proof of God's existence that we want but, whether we use religious language for it or not, the experience of God's presence. That is the miracle that we are really after. And that is also, I think, the miracle that we really get."¹

This morning we heard another story about a "message in the stars." The word of the Lord came to Abram and said, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." Old man Abram, along with Sarai his wife well beyond the child-bearing years, asked God to be a little more specific about the reward: "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" In response, the Lord took Abram outside and told him to look up into the night sky. Abram didn't see "I REALLY EXIST" or "GOD IS," spelled out in the Milky Way stars, but he did see the uncountable stars. And the word of the Lord said, "So shall your descendants be."

Remember now, Abram is already seventy-five years old, and his wife Sarai is not far behind. As someone has said, at a time when they should be buying Depends, God tells them they'll have to buy diapers. Someone has wryly commented that Abram and Sarai never in a million years would have imagined that they would have to use Medicare to pay the hospital maternity bills!

So, under those circumstances, who could blame Abram if he had turned to God and demanded, "Give me some proof, God. I'm having a hard time believing what I'm hearing. Spell it out for me. Convince me once and for all that what you're telling me is going to happen is really going to happen." But that's not what Abram did. Instead, he listened to the word of the Lord, he looked up at the stars in the night sky, and as the scriptures tell us in one of the most remarkable displays of faith in the Bible, "And [Abram] believed the Lord and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness." (Genesis 15:6)

Abram believed and the Lord reckoned. Abram didn't do any particular good acts. He didn't follow God's law perfectly (how could he? God hadn't given the law yet). Abram wasn't better than everybody else so that God was obligated to choose him and give him a great reward. Instead, out of the blue, God offered Abram a gift — an **unbelievable gift** considering how old Abram and Sarai were. And Abram believed God. Another way to put it is, Abram trusted God. Even more specifically, Abram trusted God's Word. God told Abram, "My Word is my bond" and despite the ridiculousness and seeming hopelessness of their situation, Abram trusted that God's Word is God's bond.

One silver lining in all of this coronavirus pandemic that has forced us to rely on Zoom meetings is that Phil and Nancy Brice has been able to join us from Castle Hayne for our weekly Bible studies. Phil is a child of this church and Nancy is a member of Rockfish Presbyterian Church. This week, as the Zoom group was talking about Abram's giant leap of faith when he "believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness," Phil told us this story:

On April 9, 1977, Phil went to Reed's Jewelers in downtown Wilmington and talked with Mr. Zimmerman about buying Nancy's engagement ring. They agreed on a

purchase price and Mr. Zimmerman wrote out a certificate of authenticity. Then he told Phil, “I will make you a similar ring for your wedding band at no extra charge.” And he said, “I’m giving you the certificate for the engagement ring, and my word is my bond for both rings.”

According to the online Urban Dictionary, the phrase “My word is my bond” has its roots in a British maritime brokers’ phrase. Since 1801 the phrase has been the motto inscribed on the coat of arms of the London Stock Exchange where, according to the source, “bargains are made with no exchange of documents and no written pledges are given.”² According to another source, the phrase can be traced back at least to 1500 to a Scottish source that reads, “O kingis word shuld be o kingis bonde.”³

The Scottish origin is interesting and important because we know all too well from experience that, though someone’s word **should be** someone’s bond, that’s not always the case. When you buy a car or a house, you sign a thick stack of papers that legally bind you and the seller to the contract. But when you pledge your commitment to someone — say in front of God and witnesses in a wedding ceremony — the marriage certificate may verify the legality of the union, but the relationship has to be built on trust that the other person’s word is his or her bond.

That’s why the apostle Paul writes about our relationship with God, “For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace — in the presence of the God in whom [Abram] believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.” (Romans 4:16-17) If that language sounds as if it might be referring to both God creating the world and raising Jesus from the dead, you’re hearing right. For Paul uses Abraham’s faith as a type, an illustration, an encouragement, and a call to you and me. He writes, “Now the words, ‘it was reckoned to him as righteousness,’ were written not for [Abram’s] sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.” (Romans 4:23-25)

My dissertation advisor once told me this about studying the letters of the apostle Paul: “Reading Paul’s letters is like peeling an onion. You keep peeling back layers and finding more and more layers. And, oh yes, sometimes Paul’s letter’s can make you weep because they can be hard to understand!” That’s certainly true, but on this particular topic, Paul is crystal clear — our relationship with God is based entirely on what God has done for us in Jesus Christ and not in any way on anything we have ever done or can ever do to merit God’s promise and grace and mercy and love. That’s why Paul writes, “It depends on faith” — so we will remember that the gift of the right relationship we have with God is all God’s doing.

Throughout the Bible and in the history of God’s people (including us), God says, “My word is my bond.” And, ultimately, God’s Word to us in Jesus Christ is his greatest promise of all. Think about the majestic words that introduce the Gospel of John — “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” (John 1:3) The word for “Word” is “Logos,” a

Greek philosophical term that John used to express God’s great love and purpose for his world and his people. But, John redeems the “Logos” from being simply a philosophical ideal, detached from the reality of our human lives, with all of our hopes and joys, sorrows and defeats. For John will write, “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14)

Consider everything that is happening in our lives and world today — the Covid-19 pandemic, the civil and racial unrest at a boiling point, the grim news of another recession, the seemingly ever growing prayer concerns list, the burdens and worries you carry. And then consider, again, what Frederick Buechner had to say about the message in the stars: “For what we need to know, of course, is not just that God exists, not just that beyond the steely brightness of the stars there is a cosmic intelligence of some kind that keeps the whole show going, but that there is a God right here in the thick of our day-by-day lives who may not be writing messages about himself in the stars but who in one way or another is trying to get messages through our blindness as we move around down here knee-deep in the fragrant muck and misery and marvel of the world. It is not objective proof of God’s existence that we want but, whether we use religious language for it or not, the experience of God’s presence.”⁴

The word of the Lord came to Abram as a gift. The Lord told him, “My word is my bond.” And Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord reckoned to it him as righteousness.

The Word of the Lord comes to us as a gift in Jesus Christ. Will we believe that Word? Can we believe that Word, especially when the circumstances of our lives might seem as impossible and as laughable and as hopeless as those of Abram and Sarai?

Yes, we can believe that Word. We can trust that Word. Because our God who speaks the Word to us in Jesus Christ has shown us again and again that he can be trusted when he says, “My word is my bond.”

Let us pray: Here’s a prayer reflection inspired by Romans 4:18, where Paul writes that, “Hoping against hope...” Abraham continued to believe the promise of God.

Rough Translations (inspired by Romans 4:18)

Hope nonetheless.
Hope despite.
Hope regardless.
Hope still.

Hope where we had ceased to hope.
Hope amid what threatens hope.
Hope with those who feed our hope.
Hope beyond what we had hoped.

Hope that draws us past our limits.
Hope that defies expectations.
Hope that questions what we have known.
Hope that makes a way where there is none.

Hope that takes us past our fear.
Hope that calls us into life.
Hope that holds us beyond death.
Hope that blesses those to come.

~ written by Jan L. Richardson, and posted on The Painted Prayerbook.

NOTES

¹Frederick Buechner, "Message in the Stars," in *The Magnificent Defeat* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), pp. 44-47.

²June 10, 2016, "My word is my bond," at www.urbandictionary.com.

³Victoria S. Dennis, November 22, 2007, "My word is my bond," at www.phrases.org.uk.

⁴Buechner, p. 47.