

*Provisions for the Journey: Trust*

Second Sunday in Lent

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Text: Genesis 15

Perhaps you noticed in this month's Hope Church news, an article about 'Worship Planning is a Team Effort' – if not, you can go back and read it or find it on our website if you'd like– it's an article from the Worship, Prayer and Spirituality ministry about the collaborative way that liturgy is developed for our worship services in general and in particular a note about the planning for this season of Lent at Hope Church – it talks about how the theme of Provisions for the Journey was developed, drawing images from the lectionary texts for the season - 'Provisions for the Journey' and then a particular focus each week: Word; Trust; Feast; Forgiveness; Extravagance'. An evocative and engaging theme, we hope - but just something to note: if you were to go and look in the lectionary passages for those particular weekly words, you will not find all of them to be there. Instead of the precise word, it's the encompassing theme in the group of passages that the planning group heard and tried to express. And this week is my prime example – 'Provisions for the Journey: Trust' – that's a good theme – but look through the passages and you will not find the word trust - instead as we read through and reflect on the passages, we trust that you will feel and find the concept of trust present there as a dynamic surrounding and at the heart of what is going on.

Or even more so, perhaps it is the job of the preacher to make that clear – but to do that, this preacher would like to add another word into the mix in addition to trust – another word that does not appear in these passages - and put out there for you today that in these passages trust seems to have most to do with patience – trust and patience, trust as patience, is what I'd like to explore.

That struck me as a new idea for me this week – seeing the connection of trust and patience. I've thought mostly of trust having to do more with some of the other themes we also heard in the scripture today – the

Psalm talks about not being afraid, about looking to God as strength and support, having confidence in God's presence – that is trust; the Genesis story about Abram talks about belief and covenant – expressions of trust, a relationship that trusts in God. Those are important aspects of what trust is about – but then I started seeing patience as part of the picture too – particularly in Abram's concern about an heir, or more precisely the lack of an heir for Abram. God expresses to Abram the promise of blessing, but Abram's response is 'you've given me no offspring; my heir will be one of my servants' – Abram is distressed because having an heir was a huge issue for that culture, it was the way a person's name and legacy are continued, so Abram has plenty of self-interest going on here in that regard – but to Abram's credit he does also see this as a legacy of faith to pass on, Abram's household as followers of the LORD God – does God want that legacy to end too? God's response to Abram is – 'you will have an heir – and your descendants will be like the stars in the heavens' – that is, God's response is, in a word, 'patience' – 'trust me, Abram, this will happen – patience'. And it says Abram believes - and it is then that the story of the covenant unfolds – it's in the context of trust and patience that we have this mysterious story of sacrifice and vision and flame and promise: 'the Lord made a covenant with Abram'.

What Abram has to do is to have the trust, the patience, for that promise to unfold. Trust and patience – like I said, that was a new connection for me, and I was pretty proud to share that original insight with you, until I started looking and found this is not an unique insight on my part. It didn't take much effort to find commentators and websites and reflections that make the connection between trust and patience – patience as trust's twin, or first cousin, or kissing cousin – you can pick your preferred familial image. There is a lot out there that explores how a relationship of trust is played out through the quality of patience – trust as patience that both endures over time and that believes something of the possibilities to be found in time.

And the thing about this Abram story is that it expands that idea of trust and patience to even a broader scale of time – an arc of time beyond our own lives, a trust and patience that not only contains our lives, but proceeds and follows our lives too. I think that's an important and challenging step to take – a step back, perhaps, that tries to have a broader perspective of life and time. It's not a way of thinking I'm

particularly accustomed to or practiced in – there is enough to hold our attention day to day, focused on our own lives, and immersed in our time. But the story line of scripture is insistent both in telling the stories of particular people, and also in giving a long arcing story of God’s plan and purpose played out over time. We see that here in the story of Abram connected to the concern for an heir and a promise made not just to Abram but also to his descendants. And interestingly enough, I think, it’s a dynamic that you can see too in the verses that were left out of the Genesis reading today – you might have noticed it was Genesis 15 verses 1-12 and then 17-18; well those intervening verses are a bit of a digression into a description of how Abram’s descendants will endure oppression in Egypt for 400 years and then be brought back to possess this land – and commentators debate as to whether this is an original part of the story or a later addition from some helpful priestly editors. But regardless, what this digression points to is the sense of the long scope of things that is imbued into this story and into its understanding of a relationship with God – it is trusting in God for the long haul – it is a patience about the purposes of God that spans and endures through the generations; and it is a trust born out in patience through circumstances often at odds with anything that looks like the promises and blessings of God.

So what do you make of that – that long and broad perspective? – does that nurture a sense of patience in you that is helpful at all? I don’t know – I confess that I really struggle with that, of how to have that long-term perspective and to receive the wisdom it can bring. And perhaps that’s because I first have to deal with the concerns I have about it, of how such a perspective of patience could be misused – which is most plainly that patience could be seen as a luxury for those who are doing pretty well anyway, and as an excuse not to do much for those who are struggling. Right? – what if patience is used as a way to mollify urgency? – ‘change takes time, be patient’; as a way to perpetuate inaction or abrogate responsibility? – ‘it’s in God’s hands, be patient’. Is that what to say to people who are suffering, oppressed? to those in the midst of injustice? No – it seems important just to name that - that there can be great peril, great offense, in that misuse of patience; so having said it, can we be opened to a kind of trust in God that sees patience very differently? Well as best as I can see it, the kind of patient trust we are called to is a view that sees God at work both in the past AND in the future – a God faithful over the long arc of time -

and then in doing so, it calls us, empowers us, strengthens us, frees us, to be faithful in our time and place in the present.

Which leads to a final connection along the lines of trust and patience – which is that I wonder if that broad perspective of time that trust and patience is most directly played out in our particular lives to be faithful in the present in this way: by avoiding the temptation to take shortcuts. And I want to tell you what I mean by that by looking at one more part of that Abram story, and then making a pivot to the story about Jesus in Luke. With Abram, you might think this story settles things – Abram understands God can be trusted now and into the future generations – all set; but read ahead in Genesis and you find Abram keeps trying to hedge his bets – he and Sarai decide it's a good idea for Abram to have a child with Sarai's servant Hagar, and when Ishmael is born Abram tells God 'here's a good heir'; God says 'no offense to Ishmael (literally – God blesses Ishmael) but that's not how it works' – and eventually the promise is fulfilled in the birth of Isaac. If we can set aside some of the particulars here about the ethics going on with Hagar – this is no model for healthy relationships - then couldn't this say something about knowing how to live out our role as someone trying to be faithful to God? Abram wants to manage things – that is, to find a more expedient, more obvious way than God provides; God says, 'no, just follow my way'. And it seems to me that is part of the trust, the patience, of what faithfulness looks like in our lives – believing that is faithfulness to God, moment by moment, day by day, over the long haul, following God's ways is the role we play in God's plan and purpose in this world; and that it is faithfulness to God's ways over time - in our relationships, in our vocations, as citizens, as a congregation, in our lives individually and shared – that we find fruitfulness, blessing, purpose.

That is the choice within ourselves to make, to trust, to be patient with. But then I want to just pivot for a last moment to the story of Jesus. It's an intriguing story in its own right – if you recall, Jesus is told that Herod (the local roman ruler) is going to arrest him and kill him. And in Jesus' response you can feel Jesus seething – his anger and indignation – 'you tell that fox' Jesus says... 'tell him that his threats have no power over me – I will be about what I am supposed to be about' It is not avoiding Herod that Jesus is

talking about or avoiding death, as he turns toward Jerusalem – it is that Herod’s threats will not determine his actions; it is about being faithful in the face of what opposes God’s will and ways. And there is a word for us there too. Not that I can compare my circumstances to those of Jesus – nor to many who face threats and circumstances often too difficult to bear. But we can find courage and encouragement in this path of our savior – not to be dissuaded or discouraged, intimidated or belittled by the powers of this world that oppose God’s ways – but to follow the path God has given us, believing we can be faithful.

Psalm 27 ends with: ‘Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD’ – trust and patience: not a biding time waiting for God to arrive, but the patient courage that trusts God is at work in our lives and world; a trust often not from our circumstances, but in spite of them; a patience not passive, but faithful, even as God is faithful to us. AMEN.