
Land and Descendants, or Belief and Relationship?

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler

Lent 2 – Year C

Abraham believed the LORD and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. ... When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. 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. Genesis 15:7, 17-18

Our first lesson leaves us with the weird details of quite a confounding ritual! A smoking fire pot dancing through the divided pieces of sacrificed animals? I dare not try, this morning, to explain what those ancient details might signify. But I do want to explore what the belief of Abraham signifies. In the Book of Genesis, the word of God for Abraham, and then Abraham's response, is one of most important exchanges in the entire Bible, and for all spirituality.

"Look towards heaven and count the stars!" says the LORD, "so shall your descendants be. ... And to your descendants I give this land, from Egypt to the Euphrates." Those words, and the interpretation of that promise, have rolled through history. Throughout history, the various ways that people have claimed children and land have provided comfort to some, but those claims have often caused amazing violence and destruction to others.

This morning, I do not focus on the promise of land and descendants. To focus on only land and progeny is to miss the dramatic miracle of human faith. Today, I focus on the response of Abraham, the will of Abraham, the faith of Abraham. In Genesis, and throughout the Bible, it is the will of Abraham that is important: "Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness."

This past week, I celebrated with a young couple who just had their third child. What a wonder! Three children is more than usual these days, and this couple seems to be good at having children!

But, this very week, I also grieved while talking to another young man, who learned that he is unable to have children. At least, he cannot sire them. He and his lovely wife can still adopt, or even try other methods; but their present disappointment is devastating.

Is one of these couples more blessed by God than the other?

There is another couple this week unable to buy their first home, who cannot afford that small piece of land they have dreamed of. Are they less blessed than their neighbors, who are actually buying a larger house next month?

Something in the human spirit desires offspring, progeny, descendants. Abraham, I am sure, wanted children and grandchildren! Something in the human psyche usually desires a home, too, land and a house. If not forty acres and a mule, at least an apartment somewhere, or a condo.

Descendants. Land. In this vision from the Book of Genesis, descendants and land seem to be promised to Abraham by God. Those may have been the things that Abraham thought he wanted. But I believe that what we human beings really want is remembrance. We want people to remember us. How will we be remembered?

This week, I learned from a young woman that her mother-in-law was about to die. This woman's life has been well lived, for sure, but her life will end. This week, I learned of the terminal disease of another friend.

The judge, Antonin Scalia, has died in the past week. The writer, Harper Lee, has died. The philosopher, Umberto Eco, has died. At their death, at anyone's death, we ask, "What did they leave behind? What kinds of descendants do they leave? What did they achieve?"

Harper Lee had no children, and Antonin Scalia had nine. Umberto Eco had two. But we will probably remember them, not for their children or for their land – but for their belief, their faith, their drive and initiative. Umberto Eco (in *The Name of the Rose*) wrote about searching for a long lost book of Aristotle! Harper Lee taught us about racism, Scalia about the tenacious grip of the original word.

"Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." We tend to think of that statement as a form of divine legal transaction. Tradition has taught us that somehow Abraham believed the right way, and thus the legal and formal transaction was made valid. He would receive progeny and land.

But that is not, that is NOT, what righteousness means. A more proper understanding of "righteousness" is key to understanding the entire Bible!

Throughout the Bible record, from Genesis to Exodus, from the prophets to Jesus, and certainly to Paul, there is a healthy definition of "righteousness" which does not mean legal justification or legal standing. The proper and holy definition of the word "righteousness" is "relationship." "Righteousness" really means "right relationship."

"Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as relationship." That's what belief does for us, too, and it is what faith does for us. Good belief puts us into relationship. Good faith puts us in relationship. It is right relationship that means righteousness for us.

There are people in this life for whom the material and objective signs of success do not occur. People who lose their land. Couples who cannot have children. Couples whose children die too soon. These are some of the inevitable features of life. Sometimes life serves us wonder and delight. And sometimes life serves us sour wine indeed.

There is only one salvation in life, only one thing that gives us hope, and it is not land or descendants. And it is not a legal standing of righteousness, or some kind of legal transaction that gives us hope. The only true salvation in life is relationship. To believe in God is to be given relationship. Abraham believed God and, thus, he was given relationship.

Even people with no children at all can teach us much about relationship. That is what Harper Lee taught us in *To Kill A Mockingbird*. She taught us right relationship. In the 1962 movie version of that book, Atticus Finch tells his daughter Scout this, "I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It's when you know you're licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see through it not matter what."

Abraham believed God even when he knew he was licked, that he was too old, that he was hopeless. It is his belief, his faith, that continued after him. That's why Paul could say that every person of faith is a child of Abraham, whether that person is blood-related to Abraham or not. Abraham's contribution to God's kingdom is not the children he sired; it is the faith he chose. Those who believe like Abraham, even when life looks hopeless, are the descendants of Abraham.

Human civilization is replete with odd traditions and rituals, from sliced animals to smoking fire pots, to eating bread and drinking wine. Those rituals in themselves are not magic; they don't miraculously justify us and save us. The only valuable meaning they have is if they bring us, humanity, closer to relationship. The rituals that count are those that draw us closer to God, and those that draw us closer to each other. The rituals of true holiness are those that remind us of relationship.

The great promise of God, then, is not land or descendants. The promise of God is relationship. Holy relationship. Abraham believed God, and it became relationship for him.

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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