

**Inward dark is parting** (Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18)

*Lent 2*

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Last week, I spoke of deserts as beautiful and difficult places. In the spiritual life, literal and metaphorical desert experiences often go together. The story of Jesus' in the wilderness is an example of this, and today's Old Testament reading is another, and it's to that reading I turn in this reflection.

In recent years, the book of Genesis has become increasingly significant for me. I value its stories and the way they reflect the life in all its ordinariness, mess, and possibility, despite being thousands of years old. Of all the characters in this rich and layered text, Abraham and Jacob in particular have helped me make sense of my experience and journey of faith. Today's reading focusses on one of them – Abraham, right in the middle of his story.

By way of a little bit of background, the 24 chapters of Genesis involving Abraham are structured around 7 encounters with God - Yahweh. Together, these seven encounters tell the story of a relationship of growing trust. If you went to Sunday School, you'll recall that Abraham was often associated with 'faith'. In Romans, the apostle Paul refers to him as 'the Father of faith' (Rom 4.11). It's high praise, but if you dwell with his story, you'll recognise that his journey was neither smooth or straight forward. There were many twists and turns; he made mistakes, sometimes repeatedly. Despite the assurances that he and Sarah received, and moments of heroic fidelity, deep fear was also present, and coming to terms with this fear was a long and testing process.

In today's text, which describes the fourth (and central) encounter with Yahweh, it is his *fear* that Yahweh addresses. This is especially striking because this encounter follows on from scenes in which trust and courage seem especially evident. The '*After these things*', with which our reading begins, refers to his spirited staking out of the land in back in chapter 13 and his valiant rescue of his rather 'flaky' nephew Lot in chapter 14. Abram is looking confident and steady, but then here in chapter 15, somewhat surprisingly, Yahweh appears in a vision saying: *Fear not!!*

*Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.*

So, what's this about? Is this just a standard one-liner for God, your typical divine greeting, or is God addressing something specific, a fear that remains in Abram despite these recent outward signs of boldness? And if so, what's the nature of this fear? From what does Abram need God as 'shield'? Well, let's read on.

*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?' ... 'You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.'*

For the first time in his encounters with Yahweh, Abram actually speaks. It's a kind of protest, he pushed back here. It shows him growing in confidence with God, but also reveals what's worrying him. He's anxious about his family line, his name, his identity. In that culture, to have no male offspring was to have no future. Abram held other fears too, fears that surfaced, for example, on his infamous trip to Egypt. *When you're asked, tell them you're my sister*, he says to Sarai (his desirable wife!), *because if they discover I'm your husband they'll kill me* (cf. Gen 12.10-20). Fear for the future, of death, of

not having enough, these primal fears trouble Abram, and, they trouble us as well.

So, despite his bold exploits in recent chapters, Yahweh's exhortation to 'fear not' makes complete sense. If Abram is to become a free and faithful partner with God in the blessing of Creation --- which was the promise and invitation back in chapter 12 (vv1-3) --- his fear must be addressed. And one of the truly heartening aspects of his story is the way in which God does this.

Abram, *'this man [Eliezer] shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.'* Along with verbal reassurance, God brings him outside to count the stars, if he can. As with the stars, God says, *'so shall your descendants be'*. And, in a moment of peaceful acceptance Abram believes. And, we're told, *'the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.'*

Now, as good protestants know, this little verse has a long and dignified history. It was key to Paul's argument about 'justification by faith' in Romans, and for Martin Luther's arguments with debased religious practice in the 16<sup>th</sup> century - the Reformation. I'm sure many a preacher on this text has been tempted to stop at this point, a high point in Abram's faith journey, but the story doesn't end here, as if Abram is suddenly free of fear. No, in the very next verse, he's worrying again: *'But he said, "O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it (this land that you brought me out from Ur to receive)?"'* It's exasperating - one moment, he's full of faith, and the next, flooded with doubt. And, who of us, hasn't been there too?? But again, Yahweh acts to reassure him: *'Bring me a heifer three years old, and a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtle dove, and a young pigeon'*. Abram does as he's directed; and then, seemingly without direction (but obvious purpose) he divides the animals and lays each half

over against each other. The scene is set, all that's left to do is wait, but waiting on God isn't as easy as it sounds.

In this case, the immediate challenge is external. Vultures arrive intent on eating his sacrifice. Abram has to work hard to keep them away. No doubt there were internal challenges as well. While Abram's shooing birds, I imagine him wrestling with his own thoughts - What am I doing? Is this what God wants? What do I think's going to happen here? And, what happens when I'm too tired to fend off these damn birds...? What's notable here, it seems to me, is the way he perseveres for as long as he can. That's what it can come down to in the life of faith – holding on, waiting faithfully on God, for as long as we can.

As night falls, Abram, exhausted, falls into a 'deep sleep'. Interestingly, it's the same Hebrew word as was used to describe Adam's sleep in the garden, when God fashioned Eve from his rib (Gen 2). A clue perhaps that something significant is about happen. Also, that if anything *is* to happen, it'll be at God's instigation. Abram is still present, he's hung in this far, but he can no longer do anything, only undergo what God does with him.

And during the night, *'a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him'* or, as Hebrew scholar Robert Alter translates it: *'a great dark dread came falling upon him'* (Genesis). Do you know this experience? Waking at night feeling overwhelmed, pressed down, desolate, despairing. Something profound is enveloping Abram, a black fog. You'd be forgiven for thinking it was a descent of evil, but in the story, mysteriously, it's a portent of God. In the next sentence, God speaks, reassuring him, and then, as smoke and fire, God passes through his sacrifice. The covenant is reaffirmed... the

relationship deepens, and the next day Abram rises with promise stretching before him.

This is a strange and yet powerful story. It's hugely significant for Israel as God's covenant people, and for Abraham himself. But what does it mean for us? Two things seem important and worth pondering.

The first is reassuring for the church in dark times, and those of us who may be in a dark place, and that is that the God of Abram, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel, the God of Israel, our God, is the God who enters and transfigures darkness from within --- the light who shines in the darkness and is not overcome (cf. John 1.5). In this sense, Abram's story seems to prefigure the paschal mystery, the story of black Friday, when Jesus himself, swamped by dread (*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*), falls desolate into the darkness of death. Seemingly extinguished, his dead body is placed in the earth, a burial tomb, all earthly hope is gone. Yet in that black tomb transformation is wrought, and he emerges alive and alight on Easter Day. On the first day of creation, God spoke and said: *'Let there be light'*. On Easter morn, God spoke and it was the beginning of a new creation. Within our darkest night, God kindles a fire that never dies away...

But there's a second, deeper mystery in Abram's story, a paradox, and that is that God sometimes comes *as* darkness - not only as light shining in the darkness, but as the darkness itself --- as night, the absence of light. And what matters when this divine darkness overshadows us is not to panic, but to keep faith, to undergo it (as Abram did), trusting that in and through this 'midnight of the soul' (John of the Cross) something is being wrought - a covenant of hope. For us, this darkness may descend in a time of crisis - the loss of our job or health, a failure or betrayal, the death of a loved one, the

onset of dementia. The world as we know it collapses, meaning collapses, and we find ourselves on the edge of the abyss, desolate,whelmed over with dread. No one willingly goes to this place or seeks this experience, mostly it comes to us (like Dante Alighieri finding himself in a 'dark wood' midway through his life journey) but to know that this is not a god-less or god-forsaken place, that it is a 'luminous darkness' (John of the Cross), can make all the difference. For Abram, *this* experience of darkness was the necessary prelude to deeper union with God - holy communion. Martin Luther King once famously preached that '*darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that*'. It's true, but sometimes the light of God is experienced *as darkness*, at least at first. And when that happens, let us cling to the promise that stands as sentinel to this strange story: '*Do not be afraid, Abram, [for] I am your shield, your reward shall be very great*'.