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Genesis 15:1-6

It's interesting that here we have an earlier part of the story we had a couple of weeks ago when God showed up to visit Abraham and Sarah. This comes before God had changed Abram, meaning great father, to Abraham, father of many. We get the story out of order here because the lectionary and liturgical year walk us through the life of Christ. Old Testament readings that reflect a similar circumstance or theme were chosen to help us see the connections and reinforce the Gospel message.

Here we find out that Abram has a problem. He wants an heir to follow him. Abram has, thus far, proven himself to be a very faithful man. We don't know much about him before God initially calls him, but we do know that God tells him to gather his family and all of his worldly possessions and set off across the country to settle in the region that would later be Israel. He doesn't seem to put up much of a fuss about this and does as he's instructed.

Later, his nephew Lot gets caught up in some local skirmishes. Abram has extensive land holdings and seems to have a few hundred, or more, people working for him. He gathers a personal army to retrieve his nephew from the local king who had captured him. He rescues Lot and travels home, stopping at the city of Salem, which would later become Jerusalem. He gives a tenth of what he has to Melchizedek, who is king of Salem and a priest of the Lord.

It is after all of this that we arrive at the text for today. Abram, as a faithful, God-fearing man, brings his concerns before the Lord in prayer. God responds rather directly and informs him that he will have an heir. His own child will inherit his estate and carry on his lineage. Though it wasn't something he had asked for, God shows Abram that he will actually have many more descendants. He'll have so many he won't be able to count them all.

It's great that God gives Abram a promise, but really, what difference does it make? In the passage we heard a couple of weeks ago, a decade or two has passed since this point. That makes God's initial promise not all that comforting. If, as a child, you kept asking your parents for something and they always responding, "Someday, someday," then you know how unhelpful a promise like this can be. The thief on the cross next to Jesus didn't have to wait long for the fulfillment of his promise. After 15 or 20 years, the promise loses a bit of its urgency. If you're praying to God, it's probably because you have something that needs dealing with now, not 20 years down the line.

It feels a bit discouraging, don't you think? If that's really how God is going to operate then why even bother coming to him with problems at all? It's particularly true when you're at a point where life isn't really going to move forward unless the problem is solved. In Abram's case, it takes a few times before God finally delivers on his promise. He visits Abram a time or two in different ways. Aside from that, Abram doesn't do a whole lot, at least as recorded in Scripture. God just keeps telling Abram and Sarah that they will have a child.

I'm not entirely sure what I would do in a similar situation. There are people who deal with this kind of thing even today. Infertility plagues many couples in the Western world and for all sorts of reasons. There is the option to adopt, and many go that route. Adoption is a wonderful gift and those parents who adopt are doing a brave and gracious thing by giving homes to children who need them so desperately. But, many couples also aren't interested in adoption, or at least not completely. They want a child of their own, a child who is uniquely theirs, a biological offspring that will carry on their family into the next generation. It's a

powerful draw, in part because God has wired us that way from the very beginning, “Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and subdue it.” That’s how we’re made. Unfortunately, the gift of children can also become an idol. Husbands and wives can opt for all sorts of fertility treatments that can be dangerous both for mother and for their offspring, sometimes many, many offspring. The pursuit of a biological child can be such a drain on money, time, and emotional wellbeing that it can destroy marriages. Even Abram and Sarah get caught up in this as Abram has an illegitimate child in an effort to move things along. But that is not the way it is supposed to work. God is the giver of all good things and only he can give gifts like children. Children are not an idol, to whom everything must be sacrificed to.

But the problem isn’t just about children here. This could have been any promise from God. What if the problem was that you can’t pay the bills and can’t afford to put food on the table? It doesn’t do you much good if God provides that food 20 years from now. Why bother even praying for something if it won’t come for decades? It’s enough to make you question your trust in God. That’s certainly what happened with Abram and Sarah. God promised and promised and promised. In the previous passage, God was still promising. What good are those promises if they are too little, too late?

It’s no wonder God doesn’t top the list of people we contact when we’re having trouble. It’s no wonder that, when we do pray, we don’t really expect him to do much about it. Our prayers are half-hearted, because why waste a bunch of time and energy on something that isn’t going to do anything anyways? God’s just going to do whatever he wants to do, so no sense even bothering to ask. It feels a bit like being a very small cog in a very big machine. Everything goes on about its business and you just have to take whatever comes your way. You can’t do anything to change anything. Only God can do that and God doesn’t seem interested.

What’s interesting to us is how the story today continues. Abram asks for an heir. God doesn’t hand one to him then and there. He makes a promise, but he also gives something more. God directs him outside and has him look at the stars. God tells him that he will not have just one offspring, but he will be the ancestor of a multitude, so many that he won’t be able to count them all.

God is showing us the problem here. A problem Abram doesn’t really get, even here, and neither do we. Often the only things that concern us are the things right in front of us that are threatening to collapse. We see the immediate disasters, the immediate heartache and suffering that looms right on the horizon. Any real thought of the future is lost to the concerns of right here and now. Abram’s attention was focused very small and narrow, he only cared about the immediate problem he had. God’s attention is everywhere, all the time, past, present, and future. God knew that Abram wanted an heir and God promised to give him one. But, God was also prepared to give him much more than he asked for, greater blessings that would affect more people.

Many generations later, Abram’s children would be the people of God. Through the power and direction of God they would settle in the land Abram now lived in. They would be the ones blessed more greatly than any other people in the world for they would have the temple of the true God and have the gracious presence of God in their midst. Much later, Abram would also be the ancestor of the Son of God who came to save his people from their sins.

God was aware of Abram’s immediate problem, but God was also aware of other problems Abram had and that the world had. God was happy to bless him with a child, but God’s blessings were not going to be limited to just that. God had much more in store for Abram.

Our childish attitude of throwing a tantrum and demanding everything right now means we shut our eyes to the wonders God has in store for us. We look down at our broken lives and think there can be nothing more, instead of looking forward to how the Lord has already charted our life's course and has placed into his story of life and salvation. God forgives Abram for his lack of trust and God's promise to him still stood, just as he said it would.

God never says he will whisk away all of your problems with a wave of his hand, only that you should trust in him to see you through them. This is the theme Jesus picks up in the Gospel reading. There is no need you have that God is not aware of. There is no struggle you face that God does not have the power to overcome. God spoke to Abram and promised him more descendants than he could count. One of these would be the messiah. God had planned for the coming of his Son already, and Abram would be a part of that process. Even though Christ wouldn't be born for hundreds of years, God was blessing Abram with that knowledge now. Great things were coming. Things Abram couldn't even comprehend.

God repeats that same message over and over to all of his people. Put your trust in him and know that he has already handled it. God doesn't sugar coat it. As a sinner in a sinful world, you will face pain and heartache, you will face misery and sorrow. You will find yourself in situations that seem to have no solution and no way out. You will find yourself in places where it seems all hope is lost. God never promises that your time in this world will last forever. Instead he promises that, by putting your trust in him, your place in his eternal kingdom is already assured and he will see you through the struggles of this life to eternity. Through it all, trust in the Lord who is and has already provided all you need.