

## The Promise Keeper

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16, Romans 4:13-25

Bonnie Carley e-mailed me this message last week, and I wanted to share it with you. If you have ever scheduled a meeting, you will know one fact: the best way to draw a crowd is to offer food. Somehow, if there is a meal offered, it becomes an Important Meeting to attend. One church made sure that its conference during the Lenten season was an Important Meeting. Listen carefully: “The Fasting & Prayer Conference includes meals.”

At another church, the women’s group scheduled a rummage sale after Easter. The announcement read: “Ladies, don't forget the rummage sale. It's a chance to get rid of those things not worth keeping around the house. Bring your husbands.” This message was also donated by Bonnie Carley. I welcome any and all contributions to add humor and spice to my sermons.

One February, several years ago, my family had took a trip together to Florida. The vacation was planned by my two daughters for our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. The four of us had a wonderful time. We visited Disney World, took a short cruise to the Bahamas, and then drove down to Key West. It was the first truly memorable vacation of my life.

At Disney World, we went to Epcot Center, and learned about the history of energy. There was a large, panoramic display that depicted the discovery of fire, capturing energy from water and the air, the use of coal, electricity, and nuclear energy, and so on up to today. At the end of the exhibit, our guide asked the group a question: “What do you think will be the most powerful source of energy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?” No one had a good response. Then the guide concluded with an unexpected answer: “Imagination.” I found that answer to be fascinating.

“Imagination is the most powerful source of energy.” Today, I would like to share my reflections on imagination in faith.

The reading from Genesis 17 introduces the story of Abraham, who receives a blessing, the covenant of God. And the reading from Romans 4 explores St. Paul’s interpretation of the covenant between God and Abraham. Abraham was a promise keeper, an ancestor of our faith. God saw him as a righteous man, and loved him as he kept His promise.

According to the midrash, which is a reference book of the Jewish Bible, Abraham was called from the midst of idolaters. After reflecting on the powerlessness of false idols, Abraham went on a search for the true God who created the universe.

Abraham's father was an idol maker and a business man. He carved images of animals out of wood and sold them as idols. But he didn't believe in those idols that he made. One day Abraham entered the storehouse where his father kept the wooden idols. When Abraham looked at these false idols, he wanted to destroy them. So he smashed them all, leaving only the strongest looking one.

The next day, Abraham's father discovered the mess inside his storehouse, and he called his son Abraham to him. Abraham said, "I heard fighting among the idols and the strongest one destroyed all the rest of them." His father scolded him, saying, "Are you stupid? How can something made of wood destroy everything in the storehouse?" Then Abraham replied, "If you know that they don't have any power, then why do you make them and let people believe they are gods?"

When Abraham discovered that the wooden doll was a false god, he left his house to find the true God. Abraham was born and brought up in southern Babylon, then moved to Haran in upper Mesopotamia, and then to Canaan. In Haran, God called him to leave for the land which He would show him, so he and his nephew Lot went to Canaan. At Shechem, in the center of the land, God made the promise that Abraham's descendants would own the land.

Thirteen years later God renewed His Covenant with Abraham. God changed his name from Abram, which means "the father of the exalted", to Abraham, which means "the father of a multitude." God also changed Sarai's name to Sarah, and imposed circumcision as a sign of membership for Abraham's entire household. With this came God's promise that Sarah, who was then ninety, would bear a son.

Let's recall the scripture lesson of Genesis 17 together. God called Abraham and commanded him to walk in truth in His sight. Abraham was then ninety nine years old. A man of his age would probably not be chasing after dreams, but merely hoping to live his last years in good health. But God wouldn't let Abraham live that way. Instead, God said: "Walk straight and have a mission for your life. I will make a covenant between you and me."

A covenant is a contract between two parties. A contract or a promise looks to the future, and not to the past or even the present. People who make promises have a future, and have hope for the future. Those who have no hope are those who have no future to live. And those who have no mission are those who have no courage, and no energy to work.

God told Abraham, "You will be the beginning of a nation. The kings shall come from you who have no offspring. You will have a son from your flesh. You shall keep my covenant." Abraham believed in God and kept God's promise in his mind. He was a promise keeper.

“Only by Faith,” or Sola Fide, is a catchphrase of the Protestant spirit. Paul understood Abraham as a man of faith. Abraham was not a perfect man. He made some very important mistakes in his life. But God didn’t accuse Abraham of those mistakes. Instead, God cleaned up those mistakes.

During a period of drought, Abraham immigrated to Egypt. In this new land, Abraham met Abimelech, the King of Gerar. Sarah was a beautiful woman, and Abraham feared that the king would kill him if he knew that Sarah was his wife. So when he met the king, he lied, and said Sarah was his sister. Then Abimelech sent for Sarah and took her. Abraham had made a big mistake.

But God fixed this mess that Abraham had made. He appeared to Abimelech in a dream one night and said to him, “You are as good as dead because of the woman you have taken; she is a married woman.” Abimelech replied, “Did he not say to me, ‘she is my sister’?” But God said, “Return her to her husband, for he is a prophet.” And Sarah returned home safely.

Abraham made another mistake and another mess. It was not a small thing, but rather a terrible mistake, and has been the seed of conflict between Muslims and Jews even to this day. Abraham took a concubine, Hagar, Sarah’s servant. It was not his idea to take Hagar, but Sarah’s. But it was Abraham’s responsibility. From Hagar, Abraham had a son, Ishmael. But Ishmael was not the son of promise. Because of Ishmael, Abraham created a huge conflict between Hagar and Sarah. Once again, Abraham made a mess, and God had to clean it up. God sent Hagar to another place, and gave her son a separate promise of many descendants.

God doesn’t expect perfection from us. But God does expect us to keep our promise to Him. God’s side of the promise is a promise of blessing, and is fulfilled in the Gospel. God is the creator, and faith means reliance upon His creative power.

If you have faith, then keep a picture of faith in your mind. If you don’t have a picture of faith, it is vague. Then you can’t hope or pray for it, and you will not achieve it. The picture in your mind should not be erasable. Keep that picture in your mind always, and keep your faith in it, hope for it, and pray for it constantly until to get it. Your faith represents and depends upon your relationship to God.

Believing in God is not only knowing God’s existence but also glorifying God. “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.” (Romans 1:21)

Abraham was giving glory to God. If you believe in God but do not obey, do not keep His promise, and do not give glory to God, then that is the same as unbelief. Paul explains the faith

of Abraham in Hebrews 11: “By faith Abraham, even though he was past age – and Sarah herself was barren – was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who made the promise. “

“The story of Abraham was not written for his sake alone, but for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead. Abraham’s faith and the faith of those who believe in Christ are in one faith, one truth, one promise, one power and same source of grace from God.” Paul points out that if we lose the strength of God, who raised Christ up from death, our faith is in vain.

Through my ministry of twenty eight years at my previous church, I have encountered some mysteries. Among the members of my church, there were two very different types of families. One group served the church continually for years and years. The other group left the church for one or another reason, attended several other churches, and finally quit attending church altogether.

The families in the first group, the ones who kept their commitment, were very successful in their lives and in their children’s lives. The families in the second group, who eventually broke their commitments to any church, suffered serious misfortune in their lives. Some of these families were broken, and among their children, some were in prison, had dropped out of school, and in some tragic cases, had committed suicide.

The mystery was why these groups were so different. The families in both groups had started out similarly, but had very different stories to tell twenty years later.

Some years ago, Dr. Pierce Harris, pastor of the First Methodist Church in Atlanta, a was invited to preach at a maximum-security prison in Georgia. On that occasion, he was introduced in an unusual way by one of the prisoners.

The prisoner stood up in front of his fellow inmates and said, “It is such a privilege for me to introduce to you our noted speaker, Dr. Pierce Harris, and to do this I want to tell you a true story.

“Several years ago, two boys lived in the same community in North Georgia and attended the same school, played with same bunch of fellows, and went to the same church and Sunday school. One of them dropped out of church because he felt that he had outgrown it and that it was “sissy stuff.” The other boy kept going because he felt that it really meant something in his life. The boy who dropped out is Your Truly, the prisoner making this introduction today. The boy who kept going to church and Sunday school is the famous preacher who will preach to us this morning.”

Now, let me say something to you from the bottom of my heart: Don't drop out; don't lose your church; don't cut yourself off from the roots of faith. If you are in church, please stay there. If you have dropped out or slipped away, please come back soon. Or, if you have never joined a church, there's no better time than now.

I love flying kites. When I was a little boy right after the Korean War our family had to evacuate to Jeju Island, on the southern tip of Korea. The island is now a famous tourist destination. I remember that it was a windy island. When we were there, my brothers made a kite for me. It was a huge kite in the eyes of a five year old boy. My brother had drawn a smiley face on the kite for us to see. Then I suggested that the smiley face should be drawn on the opposite side, so that God could see. What a cute idea I had! Even at that time, at five years old, I was a religious boy.

The dynamics of flying a kite is so simple. If the wind is blowing hard, and the string is held in your hand firmly, then the kite will fly high. But if you lose your grip on the string, the kite will drop down to the ground within a few minutes.

The only way we can lead successful lives on earth is to keep the line of promise from God firmly in our hearts. The grace of God comes through this line of promise.

In Mark 11:24, Jesus taught us what faith is, also how to pray: "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." In other words, "Imagine, in your faith, that you have received what you prayed for, and then that image in your heart will be yours." What a wonderful pictorial message to us!

Have the imagination to envision everything that God has promised us in the scripture. Keep this image in your heart. And keep the promise of God -- be a promise keeper! That is the energy which strengthens you, awakens you, and gives you peace and hope.