

## The Oath. Genesis 15

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Well, Good morning. This is the first Sunday of the month and so at WVPC, it is also a Communion Sunday. So, on communion Sundays, Pastor Morgan has been examining the meaning of communion. This morning I'd like to consider those words that you hear every communion service, "for as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again."

Proclaim the Lord's death. Have you ever thought about what that means? Why would we want to do that?

Sure, I can understand proclaiming the Lord's resurrection, like we do on Easter Sunday. But the text doesn't say, "You proclaim the Lord's resurrection until he comes again." What it says is, "For often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again."

Now, I don't know about you, but I have never seen a T-shirt that has the words, "Jesus Died" on it. I have never seen an Olympic athlete interviewed on worldwide TV and say, "Well, first of all I'd just like to recognize the death of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." In fact, if a bumper sticker said "Jesus Died" on it, I would think it was an anti-Christian bumper sticker. And yet, the words are there: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again."

What's up with that? As I thought about this phrase over the last few weeks, I've come to appreciate and embrace it. In fact, that line is now my favorite part of the communion service for me. And, by the end of this service, I hope it will be your favorite too. In my mind, it starts from the very beginning. Right, as in, it starts with Genesis.

In Genesis chapter 12, God came to an ordinary man named Abram and says, "I will bless you" and "through you, all the people of the earth will be blessed". Abram was 75 at this point.

Ten years later, in Genesis chapter 15, Abram is 85 and he still has no son. And God comes to him again and we pick up our text as Abram is getting a little impatient. Genesis 15, starting at verse 1. [read Gen 15:1-3]

15 After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision:

“Do not be afraid, Abram.

I am your shield,[a]  
your very great reward.[b]”

2 But Abram said, “Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit[c] my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?” 3 And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”

“What can you give me?” You see that even Abram, who has the reputation of being a man of faith, has a faith that wavers. I wonder if Abram is saying, at least in part “it’s a little late now, God. I’m old, I have no children, what can you give me? what can you do for me? (or even more pointedly) What good are you anymore?” Because, if you see this question in context, God spends the rest of the chapter going through great lengths to prove to that his words are true. [read 4-6]

4 Then the word of the Lord came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.” 5 He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring[d] be.”

6 Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

Note that Abram continued to trust the promise of God and continued to believe that God was righteous and that he would do what he says.

But again, God comes to Abram, [read 7 – 11]

7 He also said to him, “I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.”

8 But Abram said, “Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?”

9 So the Lord said to him, “Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.”

10 Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. 11 Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away.

If you think about it, Abram asks for proof, and God responds with a request for animals. That’s an odd request. How are animals going to prove that God will keep his promise? Does God intend to make them talk and then use them as character references? And then

Abram brings the animals . . . and then he kills them. What's up with that? God didn't tell him to kill them.

What's happening is that God is going to making a covenant with Abram. Now, there are different kinds of covenants. Today, with our more advanced legal system, we have lots of covenants and legally binding agreements. Perhaps the one that comes to mind to many of you is the covenant of marriage. This is a covenant that comes with a lot of ceremony. And there is a prescribed pattern that marriage ceremonies tend to follow. You could probably construct one from memory, "Dearly beloved, we are gathered in the sight of God and of man . . .", "do you take \_\_\_\_ to be your lawfully wedded wife", "sickness, health, rich, poor, better, worse . . .", "with this ring, I thee wed", the first kiss, the presentation of the new couple. There are variations. But we know the general pattern.

In Abram's day, there was a covenant too that was happening in Genesis chapter 15. Every so often, a king would amass an army and go off to war. And they would march on one city, lay siege to it, subdue it, and move onto the next city. And since these cities didn't have time to mobilize, they were always smaller armies that were often easily subdued by the conquering king. During these times, it really doesn't do the conquering king much good to kill everyone in the conquered city. The king wanted gold and crops and sheep and oxen and servants. It didn't do much good to kill off everyone. So, the conquering king and the subdued city would form a covenant. And this covenant would follow a prescribed format, much like a marriage ceremony follows a prescribed format today.

Now, I won't go through all the parts of that ceremony. But suffice it to say that the conquered city would be forced to make all kinds of promises to the conquering king.

And at the end of the covenant ceremony, to add an exclamation point to all of this, they would often slaughter some animals and cut up their carcasses and put the pieces on opposite sides of a road. And the people taking the oath would walk down the middle of the road, through the carcasses and take the oath, as if to say, "may I become like these carcasses if I fail to fulfill the terms of the oath."

Now, for obvious reasons, we have not retained that tradition for our marriage ceremonies, although if you are looking for a way to make your wedding memorable, this tradition has history on its side. That's one difference between this covenant in Abram's day and a modern-day marriage covenant.

But another difference is that in today's marriage covenant, both parties are making an oath. But, in Abram's day, when a king conquered a city, only one party needed to take the oath. Only the conquered city needed to make a promise of any kind. The conquering king

didn't have to do anything except for maybe let the city live. And there wasn't much legal leverage you could apply to the conquering king. The city's promise to the king: we will give you gold and crops and servants and livestock. The king's promise to the city: I will let them, and I can call the deal off at any time.

Interesting in Genesis 15 is look who takes the oath. [read 12, 17 – 20]

12 As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. . . .

17 When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. 18 On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi[e] of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates— 19 the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, 20 Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, 21 Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites."

Did you notice? God takes the oath. I would have thought that the great and awesome creator of the universe would make pathetic, desperate Abram take the oath. But no. It is God who walks down the middle of the carcasses and recites his promise to Abram for descendants and land and says "May I become like these carcasses if I do not do what I promise. My promise to you, I will be your God. Your promise to me: Just let me, and you can call this off at any time.

God isn't a cruel God. He's a gracious and merciful God whose love is so great that he is willing to humble himself and take the oath before us.

OK. So why does it matter? We could spin up a sermon series on why it matters. For example, we can talk about how God's oath informs topics like God's unconditional love, or prayer, or baptism. But, this is a sermon on communion Sunday. And I chose this text for how it informs how we think about communion.

In communion, we join together as the very family of God and lay claim to the oath that God made with Abram. "This cup is the new covenant in my blood"

To Abram, God promised to bless him, to be with him, to be his God. To Abram, God walked through the carcasses and took the oath. To Abram, God claimed "may I become as these carcasses if I do not fulfill my promise. And for us, God fulfilled that promise when he died on Calvary's tree.

He who did not spare his own son but delivered him up for all, how will he not along with him freely give us all things?

If you ever doubt that God will keep his promises, remember that Jesus died to keep his promise. If you ever wonder if God's love is real, remember that Jesus died for you.

When the pressures of this world are overwhelming, when you really need God to come through for you, when you wonder if God cares enough about you to be there when you need him, remember Jesus died for you.

When you've really blown it this time, when life is filled with would ofs and could ofs and should ofs, when you don't think you measure up, and you wonder if anyone would want to bother with someone like you anymore, remember Jesus died for you.

When you feel isolated and alone, when you feel forgotten and lonely, when you've been betrayed and forsaken, and you wonder if there is anyone left in this world who would be a friend you can trust, remember Jesus died for you.

Someday, on the far side of glory, we won't need to be reminded. But for now, for as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again. How do we know that God is our God? We lay claim on the Lord's death. God took the oath. And Jesus died to fulfill that oath. And, in communion, we remember that oath. In communion, we lay claim on that oath. In communion, we point to the death of Christ and we say to God, "Count me in! Count me in on that promise! Count me in on the promise to bless me, to love me, to care for me. Count me in on your promise to be my God."

You see, in reality, the fact that God took the oath affects far more than communion; it affects all of life and all of death. Life is different because God took the oath. Death is different because Christ fulfilled the oath.

On September 11, 2001, Todd Beamer led the passengers and crew of United Flight 93 to overthrow their hijackers causing the plane to plummet into a reclaimed strip mine near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Todd left behind his three and a half year old son, his 19 month old son, and his wife Lisa, who was five months pregnant. While all the passengers and crew died as heroes, we know that Todd played a crucial role in this plot because of a 15 minute phone call that he had aboard that plane with a GTE Airphone operator named Lisa Jefferson. Some of the final words she heard on that phone call was believed to be Todd, speaking to the other passengers and crew, "Are you ready? OK. Let's roll!" In life, "Let's roll!" had been Todd's catch phrase. In death, it was the last thing we know that he said.

In the final pages of his widow's book about Todd entitled "Let's Roll", Lisa Beamer writes, "But I have found safety and security in a loving heavenly Father, who cannot be shaken, who will never leave me or forsake me, and in whom I can trust completely. For those looking for hope, I recommend grabbing the hand of your heavenly Father as tightly as possible, like a little child does with his parent. God is a hero who will always be there when you need him."

There were many senseless deaths on September 11, 2001. 2,996 of them. Many tears were shed while asking why. Lisa Jefferson, that GTE Airphone operator who prayed with Todd Beamer before they stormed to cockpit writes in her book entitled, "Called", "We can live out our days trying to make sense of the senseless, or we can trust God."

How do you know that any of this is true? How do we know that God is a hero who will always be there when you need him? How do you know that when life is senseless, we can trust God? Because God promised it. And he cannot break that promise or he would cease to be a pure and holy God.

In Genesis 15, God made a promise. In Genesis 15, God took an oath. God came to Abram and walked between the carcasses, and he said to him, "I will bless you". And this same God comes to you and he comes to me and he tells us I will be your God. This promise does not depend on you. It depends on me. I'll walk through the carcasses. I'll make the promise. I will be your God. I will bless you. I will love you. I will care for you. I will be there for you . . . even if it kills me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again.

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Dear God, you are an awesome God. When it is time for a hijacked plane to come crashing to the ground, you can raise up heroes out of the ashes. When it is time for a beloved son to hang on the cross, you can fulfill a promise and offer life to all of humankind. When it is time for suffering to come our way, you can work your purpose so that good comes out of bad, hope comes out of sorrow, and joy comes out of the grief. For you took an oath to make it so. And so, as we receive this bread and cup, we proclaim the Lord's death looking forward to that day when he comes again. It is in his name we pray, Amen.