

INTRODUCTION

We all live in a broken world and that brokenness lives in us in some ways too. The ancient world that has come to be after the fall – Abraham’s world, is much worse in many ways than the world we know here today in Canada (the way women are treated, the institution of slavery, etc). And yet, if God is real, God has to show up in the most broken places.

Abraham represents a people under bondage (He comes out of “Ur of the Chaldees” (Babylon), to become his own people. This story is written while the people of Israel are in bondage to the Babylonians, inspiring them to make the journey out and become their own people again, learning their own language and re-establishing their own culture, traditions, and moral codes). Indigenous people here in Canada may find in Abraham a kindred companion making a similar journey, no?

Hagar has become an important heroine and ancestor of black people who have also had a history of slavery (Hagar was from Africa). Even as she is abused and oppressed, she finds the resilience through her own special relationship with God to rise up and become the mother of a whole people (the Arabic-speaking peoples claim her as their mother as much as blacks recognize in her an oppressed ancestor).

What other resources and treasures will be discern in these ancient stories?

GENESIS 17-20

THE COVENANT RENEWED (17)

Once again, God makes a promise to Abraham, a promise that is more like an invitation. God will bless Abraham and Sarah with many descendants. They will be the parents of a new nation that will be a beacon of goodness and justice to the rest of the world. They will be the vehicle of God’s Word to the nations. But the condition is that Abraham, himself, ‘walk’ before God and be ‘blameless.’ The nature of this blameless life of fidelity to God’s righteousness, goodness and justice becomes clear in the chapters that follow.

As a sign and seal of this covenant agreement, all the males of the household are to be circumcised. Circumcision is a visible, external sign of an inward, spiritual promise and call. Abraham includes Ishmael, whom he puts forward once again as the heir through whom God’s promises will unfold. God will bless Ishmael, but Ishmael is not the heir God has in mind. Rather, the child of promise is the child of Abraham and Sarah, not of Abraham and another woman.

It is also noteworthy that Abraham laughs at God's promise (given how old he and Sarah are to have a baby). In the next chapter it is Sarah who laughs. God's humour is evident in that the child they will have is to be named 'Isaac' which means: 'child of laughter.'

THE SUBSTANCE OF THE COVENANT - RIGHTEOUSNESS (18)

Abraham and Sarah receive 3 visitors. Even though they look and talk like ordinary men, we are given a clue that they are extraordinary, in fact, they are divine representatives of God in the form of angels (an angel also made an appearance to Hagar in chap.16). Abraham and Sarah extend great hospitality to them, and they offer a more specific date as to when God's promise will bear fruit - within a year.

Over against the hospitality and graciousness of Abraham/Sarah, and later, his nephew Lot, we witness the lack of hospitality and perverse, violent behaviour of the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah. What is fascinating is that the 3 angels confer with one another as to how much they should let Abraham in on what is about to happen. Two of them go off to Sodom and Gomorrah. Judgement is about to come upon these cities for the immoral way of life within them has become known far and wide. One of them stays behind to talk to Abraham. Abraham, on his part, negotiates with God's representative, pleading the cause of compassion. Righteousness is about integrity of character. But it is also about compassion, not justice devoid of mercy. Abraham persuades God to forgive the many for the sake of the few, even as few as 10 righteous residents among many unrighteous inhabitants.

What was the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah? Many have talked about homosexuality being the sin. But this is wrong (the whole term 'sodomy' still used in legal language today is based on a completely false interpretation of Genesis). Ezekiel 16:49 says this: 'This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.' Luke 10: 8-12 also supports the idea that the biggest sin of these cities was their lack of hospitality to strangers. Indeed, so inhospitable are they that they seek to molest the visitors through violent gang rape. What a contrast to Abraham's hospitality earlier in the chapter. In the ancient world, hospitality reflected all the great attributes of graciousness, kindness, goodness, justice, generosity, and integrity. Strangers were vulnerable, often needy, and dependent on the welcome and support they could receive.

DOOM OF SODOM & GOMORRAH (19)

Since there is no-one righteous in the cities, their doom is sealed. The visiting angels have to remove Lot and his family by force, since they linger far too long, attached as they are to the luxurious and sensual lifestyle of the cities. Sadly, this is reflected in the family relationships. Lot's wife is far too attached to look away (and she dies), while

Lot's daughters return the favour of disrespect (Lot was evidently willing to sacrifice his daughters to the mob at his door), by disrespecting him themselves through sexual incest. This also reflects negatively on Lot's descendants - the Moabites and the Ammonites. This is a sad story of generational trauma and the intergenerational consequences of abuse.

ABRAHAM'S LACK OF TRUST & ABIMELECH'S INTEGRITY (20)

Just like Abraham did with Sarah in Egypt (12), he does again with Abimelech - the chieftain of the city/town of Gerar. Abraham moves there for safety. But he is afraid that they will kill him for his wife, so he leaves Sarah vulnerable to being taken, by claiming she is his sister (which she is, in a way (half-sister)). This gives us an opportunity to witness the integrity of Abimelech (vs the inhabitants of Sodom/Gomorrah) who communes with God in his own way and has integrity of spirit (as God's covenant demands). He does the right thing toward Abraham and gives him many gifts along with the return of Sarah. Sarah & Abraham are supposed to have the child of blessing, and nothing must come in the way of that. Abimelech will be a partner in this larger plan rather than an enemy.