

LENT 2, BREACH THEME
GENESIS 15 AND 17, ABRAHAM AND SARAH
MARCH 4, 2012

I'm going to begin by complaining.

Not a very lofty way to begin, I know, but there it is. For those of you who have given up complaining for Lent I apologize ahead of time. (The good thing about that is that you won't complain about my complaining!)

Ok here's my complaint.

It's about the use of the word "religion"

It's a *good* word. A *strong* word. A word that says what it means. And somehow.... somehow we've lost that.

It's used these days as a ...slam....don't you find? When people use the word religion they don't often mean something good.

"Whatever you do don't talk religion or politics"

"Don't get all religious" and the now infamous *"I'm not religious I'm spiritual"* That last expression is usually said with the implication, it always seems to me, that those who choose to go it alone, those who don't "need" a community and the form or institution that goes along with community, that somehow they are stronger, better, more spiritually advanced, and that those of us who choose to, or need to come together with others in their spiritual journeys are somehow weaker for that need. *"You can go to church if you need to; I don't need to go to church to be a Christian."* Does it seem that way to you?

And this week, I was reading the blog of one of my favourite authors who is in the process of her next book, set in a monastery. She says, *"This book isn't about religion. It's about belief."*

Now, I THINK she meant by that (I've emailed her to ask, no response yet) I think she means that it's not about a specific denomination or institution. I get that. But....

I wish we could reclaim that word for what it really means.

Literally it means

reconnecting. Re-Ligio...."Ligaments" join things. To re-ligeo is to rejoin, to reconnect, to mend something that has been disconnected.

I like that a lot. Religion at its core, (whatever else our brokenness has made of it,) at its core it is a reaching out for connecting and for mending; individuals and communities and the world. And anything or any group or institution that does not have that at its goal, whatever else it is, is not religion.

Last week we began this Lenten series, and the theme of mending will be the one we sustain through the season. I shared with you the story that Rabbi Abraham Herschel used to tell: that God, the Holy One, when God gets up in the morning, God gathers the angels all around and asks one question:

"Where does my world need mending today"

The readings for Ash Wednesday included Isaiah 58, which we used as a call to worship today. You'll

hear it every week 'til Easter. Isaiah speaking to people whose world was broken, literally and otherwise, recalls for them the promise of God....lifts up the image of God whose business it is to mend the world, and says to them Yes there is a hole in the world...

“YOU will be known as ‘repairers’ of the breach.”

God's people are people who mend. Who repair. Who don't pretend that all is well, or avoid the brokenness of the world, but who join God in the holy work of mending the creation.

Last week's reading took us to the story of Noah and the rainbow covenant God made with the earth. (another great word, covenant...co- together ven – coming. Coming together. Covenant.)

Care bears and unicorns notwithstanding, the rainbow story is not a fluffy feel good tale for children: it is essentially a religious and political manifesto for people who are tempted to say that this world, or some parts of it, are beyond redemption; not worth the trouble; outside the care of God. God places the rainbow in the sky, Genesis says, and says “ I make my covenant with all flesh” - (somebody needs to count how many times that author says all flesh. Not subtle at all. Still, we don't seem to get it)

The rainbow, joining heaven and earth in a visual sign: a promise: a covenant, bringing together heaven and earth. Forever.

And today, following the movement of scripture, we move on now, to another covenant.

Here's the back story: In a city called Ur, or Haran, in the Babylonian Empire (where the people of Israel had been taken as captives, likely before this was written) In a city called Ur lived a man, Abram, and a woman, Sarah. God calls them....let's read it. Chapter 12.

read 12: 1-6

Abraham is 75. We don't hear how old Sarah is, but she, we'll find out later, is well beyond child bearing. They are childless. They hear a promise that God will make of them a great nation. Absurd. Laughable. What are they going to do?

They leave. They hear a voice and they follow, on the strength of a promise and a voice in the night. Among all the sounds, noises, claims of the city, in the midst of what binds them there to family and friends, in this land where they have been settled, among all those sounds and claims, they choose to follow one, and it leads them away from all they have known. A breaking of bonds. A tearing in the fabric of their whole world, and a journey. A journey that leads them to a completely different way of binding people together; one grounded in truth and that leads to blessing. God's promise is astounding; by the actions of this one family the whole world will be blessed.

They leave.

Listen again to chapter 15 as it continues the story

read 15: 1-5

Their journey must have been hard. I've not travelled in the desert butI know it is both beautiful and harsh. I picture them, at night, lying under the stars or under a flap of animal skin...wondering if they had been mistaken. Perhaps frightened, what animals lurked in darkness – who knew? And wondering,

as you DO when you're outside like that...
when you have the gift of being where you can actually see..looking

up at the stars, as you do when you have the opportunity to do that without light pollution. We pay dearly for our cities and towns, don't we? When we get a chance to be out in the complete darkness, the stars so close you could touch them....

It takes your breath away. And at that moment, the electricity and the convenience of living in town seems a small, ungenerous consolation. Those stars must have been breathtaking.

There are two responses, it seems to me, when you do that.
For some, it makes us feel small and insignificant. The Psalmist says "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, who are we that you are mindful of us?"

The distance between us and the stars, the creator, can seem immense; you ask yourself if you matter at all in the great scheme of things...and how God could possibly pay attention to YOU in the immensity of it all. Can it be that God cares for, speaks to ME? To us?

I picture A and S in that spiritual place. Feeling a bit silly for having followed what they thought was a voice and may have turned out to be just thunder or a dream. The breach, the gap, must have felt immense at that moment,

because God, in that way God has, , says "*Come on outside with me. Let's sit on the back porch*" I picture it, God's arm around Abe's hunched, frail shoulders, the old man chilly in the night air, and God says "*Look up Abraham*"

He does.

It doesn't help. It's so far....they're beautiful, the vast, inverted bowl of a sky, dark blue almost to blackness and the stars, polished and gleaming....what does that have to do with me, he thinks? The sky so lovely and I'm just a misguided old man on a fool's journey.

Count them. The voice is soft in his ear.
Count them if you can.

Count them? He starts...he can find the constellations, so familiar...but the more he looks the more he finds. Once your eyes adjust you see not only the obvious bright ones but tiny, blinking, little ones, the sky is dense with them. More and more....And then one will fall, sailing across the sky and he loses count and....

count them? Impossible.

"*So many*" the voice says, "*So many will your descendants be*"

And suddenly the sky is no longer a thing of distant beauty reminding him of his own inconsequence but rather
a sign of the promise
of his oneness with it all
and somehow a breach is repaired. The stars are no longer only there but here; in his heart, in his eyes.
In him.

He hasn't given up questioning though (we don't, do we? And we shouldn't)

God repeats the promise (vs 7)
and Abraham replies with a question (vs8)

And this is how it goes from there: (vs 9-13, 17-18)

That's how covenants were sealed in those days: an animal would be sacrificed, and the two halves laid out, and - get this now - *the party with the least power, the party with the most to lose*, would pass between the halves. As if to say "*May this happen to me if I fail to keep this covenant*" and bringing the halves of the animal together, repairing the breach in the body of the slain animal with your own body. A little more graphic than signing on the dotted line eh????
And still today the echo of this practice remains in the expression "to cut a deal"

But get *this*:

Remember I said that it was the practice that the party with the most to lose, the party with least power, passed between the halves, filled the breach with their own body?
Who is it who passes between here? Who is it who repairs the breach?
It's God! (read the verse – smoke and fire, classic signs of God's presence)

This is jaw dropping, astonishing theology.

God, the one who becomes vulnerable, God who takes the position of least power, and walks the line between the halves of the sacrifice, enters the breach and

who says "*with my own body, with my own being I put myself on the line for the sake of this covenant*"

When something world shaking like that happens,
life changes.
And thenresumes

and so it is that years later, Abraham and Sarah are still waiting, still trusting, still lying out at night looking at the stars

Years later. Again God appears, we are tempted to say "finally!" Listen:

17: 1-12

God repeats the promise
and this time seals it with another sign: this covenant is so personal, so uncompromising and all consuming that for the men among them, they will never, CAN never, forget. Even and especially in their most private times: bodily functions, intimate moments, even and especially then they cannot forget the covenant.

The stars in the heavens
and their own flesh bear witness;
bear the marks of a wound healed; a breach repaired, a world made whole
by the God who calls them, and who has promised to love them until the stars refuse to shine.