

God listens to our fears

Genesis 15

Every Wednesday a team from our church heads down to Waitara Public School and we teach each year group a 30-minute lesson from the Bible. One thing I have noticed is that there are some significant differences between teaching children and teaching adults. Children will give you instant feedback; you know if you lose their attention. Instead of sitting still, the floor will start to move as they wriggle and squirm. Instead of attentive silence, the sound of whispering will rise up in the air. Sometimes a child will stand up and start moving around the classroom! Now imagine if that was the real-time feedback I received in church. Imagine if 5 minutes into the sermon one of you jumped up from the back, wandered down the front and started sharpening their pencil in the font we have up here. You're all way too polite to present your feedback in such a way, so in that way teaching children is different to teaching adults.

But no matter who you are teaching some things remain the same. Over the last two weeks I have been speaking with Year One about *fear*. As I took the roll I asked each one to nominate something that scares them. "Big dogs" was a common answer, "getting lost" was another, "getting stitches" said one girl. As I listened it struck me that these fears can don't necessarily disappear with age. When I'm out walking Harvey there are adults who take a wide berth around him. And of course there are plenty of adults who are anxious about anything medical.

Fear is a common issue no matter what your age, and so it ought to be no surprise that it's a common theme in the Bible. Our OT reading this morning contains a great example. Like each one of us, Abram knows what it's like to be afraid. What I'd like to show you this morning is a picture not only of a man who is living in fear but of a God who responds beautifully to Abram's anxiety. Part of the solution is to allow God to minister to us in our distress, and we see God's willingness to do so here in this story.

So Genesis 15 is our text and we begin by thinking about the nature of Abram's fear. What is it that he is afraid of? Chapter 15 verse 1 After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." ² But Abram said, "Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit 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."

I wonder whether you have ever had your hopes built up only to see them dissolve? Abram's hope here is to have a child who will one day inherit his estate; a hope that many would-be parents can identify with. Conceiving children is very easy for some, not so easy for others, and for those who struggle hope can sometimes appear... only to disintegrate as you realize that "no, this is not going to be the time". Waiting to conceive is a tiring time and it is a fear-filled time. "Will it ever happen?" is the question that is asked, and this is what we hear from the lips of Abram. Abram's

situation is a *little* different to what people today might encounter, in that his hope is not sparked by a late cycle or an early pregnancy, but by a distinct promise from God. I will make you into a great nation God said. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth he said. And yet Abram's accurate observation is that he remains childless.

Skip through to verse 7 and we hear another promise from God. God also said to Abram, "I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it." Abram seems to have just as much trouble with this promise of land as he does the promise of a child, verse 8 But Abram said, "Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?" Abram's fear is that he's placed his trust in a God of empty promises, in a God whose word is hollow and worthless. Imagine a friend who offers you tickets to a show and the promise is they'll leave the tickets at the box office for you to collect. And so you turn you turn up in all your finery and as you work your way through the busy foyer to the box office there's that little hint of fear, isn't there? *I hope their promise is good. I hope they were able to secure those tickets, I hope they haven't forgotten, otherwise I've gone to all this trouble and I'll look like a fool here.* That's the fear that we hear from Abram in this chapter. He's gone to all this trouble of leaving his homeland at the age of 75, and he's afraid that nothing will ever come of it. Has he linked up with a God who ultimately is going to let him down?

Which of God's promises do *you* doubt most? Are *you* ever afraid that God will not come good on what he's vowed? It's in the New Testament that we find the promises that are most relevant for us. The biggest one is that God offers forgiveness for those who call on him; Col 1:14 In Jesus we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Do we ever fear that these words are hollow, that he's only talking about forgiving little sins and not big ones, or that God will change his mind when he sees just how sinful we are, or that there is actually more to the story, that there's some fine print, an extra expectation not mentioned here? Do we ever find ourselves asking whether God is as merciful as he says? Or perhaps the promise we find hard to fathom is the promise that heaven will be worth the cost of following Jesus. Romans 8:18 *our* present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. I think for many people are afraid of the price of following Jesus: the price of being generous with what we have; the price of maintaining self-control over our bodies and our desires; the price of looking foolish for believing what we believe. We can find ourselves thinking "this isn't going to be much of a life!" and like Abram we find ourselves with questions about God's call.

So like Abram we too can find ourselves afraid that God's promises might disappoint. What's the next step for us when these fears are threatening? With my Year One class I've been discussing Paul's verse in Philippians 4:6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. The lesson I've been teaching Year One is that we can pray about our fears. And you'll notice that this is what Abram is doing in this chapter, he's speaking to God about what he's anxious about. But sometimes we can be afraid to give voice to our fears because we're not sure about the response we'll receive back. I remember working for one boss a number of years ago who had a standard response when he felt that

someone was complaining. “Suck it up princess!” is what he used to say. “Suck it up princess!” Needless to say I stopped coming to him with problems. Is that how we think God might respond if we dare come with a complaint?

What I love about this chapter is the gentleness that we see in God’s response. As Abram voices his concerns, God responds with some beautiful words. In fact, God comforts Abram three times in this chapter, and each time he goes to greater and greater lengths to reassure Abram. The first words of comfort are those that open the chapter. Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward. What I love here is that God doesn’t wait for Abram to complain; God can see that Abram is afraid, and he speaks up first. Imagine that you’re walking around James Park on the other side of the hospital and you see a young woman sitting on a park bench crying her eyes out. Or imagine if you see an older man grab his chest and fall to his knees in pain. What would you do? You might be tempted to think “Well, if they want my help they can ask. After all, I don’t want to interfere!” I think we all know that the kinder thing is to not wait for the invitation! And that’s how we see God acting here; his reassurance comes before Abram needs to say anything.

The second moment of comfort comes in verse 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 be.” It’s a beautiful moment of intimacy between Abram and his God, as the old man is led out of the tent and shown a clear night sky full of stars. As I’ve been teaching young children I’ve discovered the world of children’s Bibles. Publishing a children’s Bible is not a task I envy, it takes a great deal of skill to simplify the message so that the end product is both faithful and age-appropriate. And then you have the task of illustrating the stories. I’ve discovered that those who illustrate children’s Bibles are theologians in and of themselves. How they illustrate Genesis 15:5 is a case in point. Some have Abram standing there all on his own, others have God as a human with his arm around Abram’s shoulder. I don’t know whether it was just a voice or if God appeared as a person, but I like the picture of Abram standing there with God at his side because I think it gets the sentiment right. God is taking the time to reassure a man who —although proven to be a great commander of fighting men in ch 14— is deep down afraid that the promise of a son will not come true. It’s a wonderfully compassionate scene.

And then we have a final word of assurance in the covenant ceremony of verses 9-11 and 17-21. God instructs Abram to arrange what to us is an unusual set up where animals are cut in two and arranged opposite each other. This would have been a complete mess with blood everywhere (we read in verse 11 that Abram had to drive the scavenging birds away). And then after dark a smoking pot and blazing torch appears and passes between the carcasses. What’s this all about? Well, it might seem strange to us, but it would appear that such a ceremony was not so strange back then. In the ancient times nations would often create covenants with each other, like nations might make treaties with each other today. And the covenant would be established with a ceremony where the parties would pass between the two halves of an animal, as if to say “If either of us break this agreement, then may we be cut in

two like these poor animals.” Basically what this ceremony amounts to is God saying to Abram, “I’ll put my promise in in writing. Would that make you feel better Abram? I think it might, so here let me make a covenant with you. Bring the animals” God’s verbal word could have been enough, but because he is generous, he offers Abram another guarantee in the form of this covenant ceremony.

And friends, this episode with Abram would not be the only time that God would go to great lengths to reassure those who are troubled. In the NT, the blood of Jesus is described as covenantal blood. Matthew 26:28 Jesus speaks about his blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. Just as Abram saw the blood of those animals and thought “God is serious about what he’s promising me”, so too we can look at the cross of Jesus and think “God is serious about what he’s promising me. He’s serious about wanting to forgive me, he’s serious about the kind of life he wants me to live, because look at the lengths we went to in order to purchase me! If you wish to last the distance as Christ’s disciple, then let God minister to you. Keep exposing yourself to God’s word and keep listening to God’s promise, keep meditating on the cross so that you remember what is true: God loves us and he is serious about us.

How does Abraham react to this reassurance from God? This chapter is a great “I love you” moment in the story. Not Abram saying “I love you” to God, but God saying “I love you” to Abram. How does Abram respond? “I love you too!” Much more profound than that! Verse 6 summarizes Abrams reaction and could provide material for its own sermon, but the short version is that Abram believes what God is telling him. Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness. The NT makes a great deal of this verse, as we heard in our 2nd Bible reading Paul especially sees this moment as one which defines what it means to be a genuine follower of God. It’s a question every religion is asking: “What does it mean to be a genuine follower of God, to be accepted by him? Does it mean joining a holy war and blowing up infidels? Does it mean pilgrimages to holy rivers? Maybe it means doing your best to love your neighbor?” But Paul says “Nah, Genesis 15:6 is where it’s at! Abram got it right. It’s about hearing God’s promise and believing in what he wants to do for you. That’s the key to righteousness, that’s the key to being right with God.” So what *do* you do when you hear God’s loving promises? You do what Abram did, you believe what you hear, and that’s actually a move that leaves you right with God.

And you should also be ready to exercise patience. Christians sometimes talk about the patience of Job, but what about Abram! God is not in hurry to bring his promises to Abram into fruition. We get a sense of God’s lack of pace in the dark dream that Abram experiences in vs 12-16. The events spoken of here are the events we read of in Exodus where the Abram’s descendants escape from the Egyptians but only after being enslaved there for many many years. Abram is told that the promise of land will take a long time to materialize. God’s promises might be sure, but they sure do take a long time. In v 16 God gives a reason for his stalling, and it has nothing to do with Abram. Rather it’s all about allowing the Amorites to fully disgrace themselves

before God would allow the Israelites to kick them out. Perhaps next time when you feel that God is withholding something from you maybe consider that God might be achieving something you're not aware of. I think that's a comforting thought: If God is slow it might be because he's doing other things that are beyond my comprehension.

There is a tragic story from Australia's history that illustrates what can happen if you run out of patience. Burke and Wills led an expedition aiming to cross Australia. Halfway there their team split in two, with one half remaining at a base camp and with Burke and Wills trying to complete the crossing. The team at base camp waited for weeks and weeks and weeks for Burke and Wills to return. After 18 weeks they decided that they had waited enough. Thinking that the others had probably died they packed up and headed home. Nine hours later Burke and Wills rode into base camp to find it deserted. Burke and Wills would die in the desert, a fate they would have avoided if the base camp had waited an extra nine hours.

As we are waiting for God, let's not give up on our patience. There's no need to fear that waiting is a pointless exercise. Through his word—and through his blood—he says to us “Do not be afraid, I am your shield, I am your great reward” and he's serious when he says this.