

Lenten Sermons: "The Promises of Easter"
Week One: "The Promise of Grace"
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Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.' But Abram said, 'O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?' And Abram said, 'You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.' But the word of the LORD came to him, 'This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.' He brought him outside and said, 'Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Then he said to him, 'I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.' But he said, 'O LordGOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?' He said to him, 'Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtle-dove, and a young pigeon.' He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire-pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day theLORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates,

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A few weeks ago I spoke about an example in the New York Times of a family who forgave the killer of their daughter. It is a dramatic story. It is a story of undeserved grace. It is beyond comprehension. It is powerful. That's a big story but not necessarily something we all go through.

Then there are the little stories of grace. I've been riding the bus and train system in Austin these last few weeks. The initial reason was to explore a way to get to the office without traffic delaying me over an hour. Over time, I realized I was getting to know the city and specifically the neighborhood in which Faith Church is located. I like to see my role as interim as part pastor, part sociologist at times.

Riding the bus I've noticed it is difficult to get to know people like you and me because our demographic, on a typical day, is connected to its environment kind of like an astronaut is to space. We are insulated in a car with a virtually seamless transition from car to home to car to work without encountering the environment around us a lot of times. Riding a bus, though, you have to deal with the "others". I've noticed a few things. The homeless get on the buses. Young people get on buses. The blind, the mentally challenged and ill get on the bus. The student. The professor. Everyone from the unbathed to the overly cologne and perhaps both at the same time. These are people. Real people. Everyday people.

One day, as I walked up to a bus stop, a young man had the biggest smile I think I've ever seen. He smiled and kept smiling at me with direct eye contact until I said something to break the awkwardness. After we greeted, he asked if the bus would be there soon. I said yes I believe so. He said, "good, I haven't been here long and I don't always know when the bus will arrive." I detected an accent and observing his dark features, I thought maybe he was from the Mediterranean / Middle East. I asked where he is from and he said Iran. Suddenly his countenance turned and he began to look down. He obviously was worried how he would be received or perhaps he already had an experience that was negative. I simply said, "you remind me of my friend Darius next door that I grew up with that was from Iran but he always told me he was from Persia because he worried what people would think of Iran in school." His countenance lifted again. He asked where I was from. I said "Texas" and I looked down and said "I hope you are having a good experience here." I caught a glimpse of him and he said, "I love Texas, you people are so friendly." Whether that was true or not, I think he wanted it to be

true, he wanted to return the grace he received and he made it believable to me. So we talked and the bus was later and later and it got darker and darker. We enjoyed the conversation. At the end I said, “when will you get to see your family again in Iran. He said, “I don’t know. The government is ready bad there.” I grieved. I grieved for a young man who was a stranger 10 minutes earlier. Grieving for one whom my nation says should be my enemy is that DNA imprinted on our hearts that is the grace of God we can choose to live into and share or not.

Let’s turn now to that time a long, long time ago in a land far, far away. Most of us may know from Sunday School that in Genesis 1 and 2 there are two “creation” accounts. The first is the majestic poem whose meter and verse we have known since childhood: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep” (Genesis 1:1-2). That’s grace of creation. Later in the text comes the second account: how God kneels down in the garden God had planted, scoops up the damp earth, and forms the first human. God’s fingerprints have covered us from the start; forever since we stained God’s palms. God breathed divine breath into the little mudman and there was life as bright as the light, but Adam was a lonely soul until God and so God improved upon the mudman and made Eve. That’s grace of companionship. Okay scientists, don’t get caught up in whether there ever was a literal Adam and Eve...just hear the narrative...hear the sequence of the story...hear the grace...

Here we have another creation story of sorts. God would give the nomad Abram land. Grace. God would give the aging and childless Abram and Sarai children. And my friends Abram and Sarai were older than any of us here...way older. Grace. Can I get an Amen? God would make them a blessing to others when, in many ways, they were without blessing themselves. Grace.

Do you see the beauty of God’s grace-filled nudging? That mud of creation was provided grace and as the story unfolds to this point we now have human community. Grace upon grace upon grace. It comes to us before we can claim it, works with us in ways that are undeserved, and if we allow it, it leads us in the Star Trek mission. “To boldly go where no one has gone before”. Because let’s face it. The Promised Land might as well have been another planet. That level of a new start.

Sometimes we forget about grace and sometimes we try our best to cover it up or explain it away but this grace is not just undeserved, it is also perfectly resilient, perfectly available, and mysteriously present all around us. I call the the Star Wars effect. Borrowing Obi-wan Kenobi words, this grace, “surrounds us, penetrates us, and binds the galaxy together.”

Let me tell you about a story which everyone else in the world believes is about anything but grace but is actually about one of the powerful acts of grace in our current world I've ever heard about. I heard it at the iAct luncheon last week.

The deadliest shooting ever on an American military base began when U.S. Army major and psychiatrist Nidal Malik Hasan tucked a semiautomatic pistol into his combat uniform, along with sixteen extra magazines and a backup revolver, and drove from his grungy Killeen apartment to Fort Hood. He made his way to the Soldier Readiness Processing Center, where medical personnel were assessing hundreds of deploying soldiers. Once inside, Nidal screamed began shooting into the crowd. Within ten minutes, 32 people were wounded and 13 more lay dead. Nidal kept firing until an exchange of bullets with two police officers left him paralyzed below the chest. This is the whole story you will hear if most media and government officials have their way. But as Paul Harvey used to say, there is the rest of the story.

You see, Michael Cahill died that day and his daughter Kerry had every reason to spend the rest of her life bitter, angry and scared. Nader Hasan, cousin of the shooter who grew up like a brother to him, had every reason to hide and minimize his life in obscurity. That's what the world wants. Fear or Anger.

But Kerry and Nader chose another path. They chose to follow that Star Wars force into that Star Trek universe going places where no one has gone before. Nader Hasan set up a foundation. In the days following the shooting, Kerry and Nader asked why the Muslim community wasn't speaking up. Nader calls himself a secular Muslim and wonders privately where the voices of protest are. For months they believed all the calls for accountability and peace were coming from sources other than the Muslim community. But what they discovered is that those voices were speaking. Loudly. I'm not one to demonize the media but sometimes acts of omission are acts of deception. The Islamic community's condemnations concerning radicalism were ignored.

So, Nader and Kerry are wielding a more powerful weapon of grace than anything any terrorist can use. It is started with the grace of forbearance, which yielded the grace of friendship which yielded the grace of collaboration which yielded the grace of activism...powerful, powerful activism. It's what the Methodists call prevenient grace and the Presbyterians call irresistible grace. Nader's foundation exists to give voice to the voiceless. That's grace upon grace.

Do you get it yet? Do you see a trend? From mud to companionship to community, God has shouted his grace. From terrorist act to best friends to advocacy and activism for peace, God is shouting his grace. As Thomas Merton

reminds us, Christianity isn't about choosing to love as much as it is about knowing we are loved. Our loving flows from that point.

But grace gets personal. In 1971 as two months early, I was not to survive. I could not breathe. My father, knelt and prayed in a hospital chapel. Grace. 11 years later, my sister is in labor in that same hospital and they cannot stop the bleeding after the c-section to bring my niece into the world. Our family was in that same chapel praying. Grace. It is no surprise that my niece works for the state as a dietician helping those on welfare, especially mothers, to improve their health and that of their family. Grace upon Grace.

It's funny when you start realizing some of these graceful acts in your life and surrounding you. You start to live differently. You start to live for different things. You begin to do for others more than yourself. Some say too much of that is unhealthy and maybe it is but I'm certain that too little of it is disastrous and unfulfilling. We cannot receive grace and not give it. If we understand grace, we can't help but be grateful and we aren't grateful, well I doubt we understand the grace that is all around us.

Do you get it?

Kerry Cahill and Nader Hasan get it. They made the statement at our iAct luncheon that tolerance and coexistence, as cool as they look on a bumper sticker made out of a diverse sample of religious symbols, is not enough. We have to get beyond tolerance and coexistence. We have to collaborate and act together in that same diversity for a better world. Collaborate.

We don't see a lot of collaboration at the state capitol these days or in Washington. We are perhaps the most polarized we've ever been and I would suggest to you it is a problem of understanding this grace.

The promise was for Abram and Sarai. They followed the promise and amazing things happened.

I finish my sermons a lot of times at Genuine Joe's coffee shop near where I'm staying in north Austin. I heard a local rabbi talking to his colleague about how young people aren't taking up the slack to maintain the facilities of the synagogue. I thought to myself, "I want to make sure there is a synagogue". I felt for him as he lamented. I'm not Jewish but I want there to be a thriving synagogue for future generations. How crazy would it be for a Christian pastor to pledge to help the synagogue. Better yet, how crazy and grace filled would it be for all of us to cross borders of faith and politics to help each other in the name of

grace.

I mean what if a Christian church opened its doors to a Unitarian-Universalist Church and a Filipino-American Christian Fellowship and a YoungLife Group of teen moms and Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays and Narcotics Anonymous and the hungry and the homeless. This is a pat on the back for allowing grace to touch you in this place but it is also a request to let this grace that is permeating this place change all of us in new and exciting ways and open us to how the promise of grace will manifest itself into the future.

The promise of grace is real and always has been. We just have to keep our ears and our eyes open to the next ways we can live into it.