

Sunday Sermon
July 2, 2017
“Almighty, Creator”
Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

Introduction:

“What I like about living in the city,” the man said to his houseguest, “is the freedom. Here there is freedom to live the lifestyle I choose, to eat where I want and to dress as I like. Freedom.”

Then he closed his door. He locked the latch, turned the deadbolt, inserted the chain, and switched on the electronic alarm, saying, “Don’t dare leave this apartment alone at night. It is way too dangerous.”(1)

Freedom? If there is one virtue on which we Americans can all join hands this July 4, it is freedom. Thomas Jefferson’s bold assertion in the Declaration of Independence that each individual has an “inalienable right” to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” still sounds sweet to our ears. We Americans may disagree on healthcare plans, immigration laws, defense, international policy, but we all agree that freedom is good.

We have built a society that has given an unprecedented measure of freedom to its citizens. I am given maximum space to pursue what I want, as long as I do not bump into you while you are pursuing what you want.(2) Only lately it seems that a lot of folks are bumping into each other. We are heirs of precious freedom, but do we really have life, liberty, and happiness? You see, there is freedom, and then there is freedom.

I.

Our scripture today takes us back almost four thousand years to the story of the forefather of all of us, Abram. His name is Abram in today’s story. A couple of chapters later in Genesis God will change his name to Abraham, meaning, “father of a multitude.”

But in today’s story he is just plain Abram. Now the biblical picture of God and Abram’s relationship is fairly straightforward. God speaks; Abram listens. God promises; Abram believes. God commands; Abram obeys. But then there comes a point when Abram says, “Wait a minute. I have some questions.”(3)

You see, Abram had lived in a country that was littered with gods. Around him, people worshiped the moon, the sun, and any number of gods of nature. There was quite a mixture of beliefs about who and what was divine, who and what was mighty and powerful. Then Abram hears a voice saying, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land I will show you.”

And Abram goes. But then in chapter 15 of this story some questions come, “How am I to know that what you promise will take place? Just what kind of a God are you anyway?”

II.

The answer Abram receives comes in a covenant with God made in the middle of the night with a whole barnyard of slaughtered animals. It is a rather bizarre scene to our reading, but in that day it was an accepted way of sealing a covenant.

Take a bunch of good-sized animals, cut them in half as neatly as you can, clear a path between the pieces, and require each partner in the covenant to walk between the parts as sort of a self-curse. By passing through the severed bodies of the animals, each partner says, in effect, “May the same thing happen to me as was done to these animals if I do not keep my word to you.” It is like what we promise, but do not really mean, when we say, “Cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye.”

Night falls, and worn out from rounding up and butchering all those animals and then chasing the vultures away from the carcasses, no doubt, Abram falls asleep. But it is a fitful sleep. In his sleep, Abram sees a pot of fire and a flaming torch pass between the halves of the slain animals.

It is the Lord, securing the covenant and repeating the promises made to Abram, promises of heirs and a land.⁽⁴⁾ It is God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, entering into a covenant with Abram that changes how he understands God and his relationship with God.

III.

And here is the truly amazing part about this story: As Abrams’ heirs in the faith, we are heirs of that relationship with God. This story marks our beginnings of understanding about God.

So what does this story teach us about God? How does it inform what we profess about God? Three insights for what we profess:

1. In the Apostle’s Creed, we say “I believe in God the Father.” When we use that parental language, we affirm God’s intimate, loving, personal, access to us. Does the title “Father” mean that God is male? Our church’s study catechism says: “No. Only creatures having bodies can be either male or female. But God has no body, since by nature God is Spirit, a living God beyond any sexual distinctions.” Why then does the creed speak of God the Father? “Because,” the catechism says, “God is identified in the New Testament as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

2. When in the Creed we say, “Almighty,” we mean “all ruling”; that is, God rules over all parts of our lives, matter and spirit, and that power is used by God for loving purposes.
3. When we say, “Creator of heaven and earth,” we are saying we believe in the One who creates not just what we see and understand but also what we do not see and can never understand. Why does the updated version of the Creed say Creator rather than Maker of Heaven and Earth? Because a maker is someone who works with materials that already exist. A Creator is someone who brings something out of nothing.

Conclusion:

When we recite the Apostles’ Creed we begin with the words “I believe,” but ultimately the Creed is not about our believing. It is about the one in whom we believe: A God so personal that we can use parental language in reference. And yet so powerful as to have control over all heaven and earth. A loving God who is personal and yet sovereign.

Popular sovereignty is at the heart of the Declaration of Independence, the belief that each citizen has authority or power for his or her own person. In 1776, we declared we had rights even equal to the King of Britain.

But divine sovereignty is at the heart of the covenant we make with God. Divine sovereignty declares that all things in heaven and earth are under God's control and rule. And that is at the heart of our faith.

One afternoon after this spring’s officer training, I came upon one of the deacons-elect who had participated in the weekend. “Sovereignty of God. Sovereignty of God,” she said. “I am repeating that to remember it is a basic tenet of our faith.”

“Sovereignty of God. Sovereignty of God,” I said, “is what I repeat every morning when I rise and read the headlines.” Though the wrong seem oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.

Perhaps you have mixed feelings in this week of celebrating independence. There seems to be a lot of bumping up against other’s freedoms these days in our country. Remember this: True freedom is not a gift of citizenship in any country. True life, true liberty, and true happiness come not from being free constitutionally, but from being in covenant with God. You see, there is freedom, and then there is freedom.

The week of the Fourth is a good time to celebrate the paradox at the center of our faith:

We are most free when we are most bound,
bound in a covenant of blessing with a loving, sovereign God,
God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.

May we believe. Amen.

Notes:

1. Adapted from William H. Willimon, "Freedom: Freedom," sermon on Acts 16:16-40, Peaching.com.
2. Ibid.
3. Daniel M. Debevoise, Pastoral Perspective, Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18, Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2, pp.5-54.
4. Barbara Brown Taylor, "Wed by God," *Mixed Blessings*, Cowley Publications, 1998, pp. 3-4.