

Release the hold that worries have on us

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Lent 2C – Gen 15 1-12, 17-18, Ps 27, Ph 3 17-4.1, Lk 13 31-35

For Kids We're about to hear part of the story of Abraham today. Abraham and his wife Sarah are very important to all of us Christians as well as to Jews and Muslims all over the world. We see them as our spiritual parents. Abraham used to be called Abram and Sarah was called Sarai. In today's story, they still had no children, and they were getting pretty old. They'd moved from their home country, a place we call Iraq today. They'd set out to go to Canaan, the place we call the Holy Land, with Abram's father Terah and their nephew Lot. But they didn't get there; they stopped in Syria.

Then in the next chapter, 12.¹⁻³, God tells Abram, *leave your father's house, and go to the place that I will show you. I will make a great nation of you – and through you, I will bless all the families of Earth.* Abram obeys God. He takes Sarai and their nephew Lot and they travel south to Canaan. There, God tells Abram *I'm going to give this land to you, your children and their children.*^{12.7} They explore the land. But then there's a drought and a famine, so Abram, Sarai and Lot go further south to Egypt to find food.

They have quite a few adventures. You can read about them with your family. But in today's reading, we find Abram and Sarai back in Canaan. They're both very old now, and Abram's really worried that it's much too late for them to have any children. He tells God his worries, and God reminds him of the old promise and who it is that made it. Gulp. Abram believed God. We know the story. We know God kept that promise. But Abram couldn't help worrying. **It's always important that we talk**

with God when we're worried about things. Now let's hear what happens in today's part of the story.

Sermon I spend a lot of time with worry; with sick or injured people and with their families who aren't sure they're going to get well again. We're worrying about my Mum's stuttering recovery from Covid. Today's readings about Abram's worries, a Psalmist facing war, and Jesus threatened with assassination resonate with all our worries about the survival of life as we know it; about war, Covid, about Earth herself.

The ancient stories have a lot to say to us in these times of worry; they are stories with lots of connections. Today, as we're back in Canaan with Abram, he's worried that he doesn't have any children to inherit this land or his money and livestock. So God reminds him of an earlier promise to give this land to Abram's descendants. We're told that Abram believes God, and God reckons Abram's belief as righteousness.

It's a strange story, this one about Abram's struggles with God. Abram's worries about who'd inherit his wealth are answered by a look at the night sky; his worries about where he'll live are answered by cutting animals in half.

We struggle with symbolism; we struggle with obscure references to other stories which are meant to explain questions about the story we're in. We call this sort of story myth. Sadly, our modern use of the word myth suggests that it's a sort of lie. But it's not. Sometimes we learn deeper truth from myth than we ever can from 'factual' reports. But it takes work; and it takes us out of the comfort zone of our wish for 'objective truth'.

There are moments in Abram's story which connect both with key moments in the biblical story, and with key issues of our time. To notice these connections, it helps to hear today's episode in the context of other things we know about Abram's life, like his journey to Egypt and back which I mentioned to

the children. That connects his story with the central story of Israel's relationship with God – the story of the Exodus. It also connects with Jesus' experience in Egypt as a refugee. And that connects with our response to people who cry out for asylum now.

Connections: We read the story about Abram's deep and terrifying sleep and maybe we sense links with the creation story where the first human was sent into a deep sleep so new life might emerge – the first woman. Maybe we sense a connection with Jesus in the tomb and his rising again. And Abram's dream also looks forward to the Exodus: God as cloud and fire leading Israel from slavery to freedom.

This story of Abram's sleep with the deep and terrifying darkness descending on him has been important to the spiritual insight our mystics have given us about the hope we can offer even to those lost in the dark night of the soul; that we can offer genuine compassion, hope and trust in God to our dear ones lost in their pain and horror; to friends; and also to strangers who are suddenly sisters and brothers like the people of Ukraine today.

In its context of the whole witness of Scripture, this episode connects us with a rich tapestry of stories to help us navigate ethical and human questions which go far beyond the experience or wisdom of any of us. And very important; these stories don't let us imagine that our judgements or attitudes are in any sense the last word. Far from nurturing dogmatic self-righteousness, these stories humble us all before God. They cry out to our compassion and shape us as people who can respond in a godly, gracious way to the challenging truth of inhumanities that we confront today.

So worries? They have a context; they have connections everywhere – with our origins, with our past and with the people we'll become – with our stories.

The ancient stories we've heard today – if we read them carefully – show us that our worries happen in the context of a much bigger story. It's the story of God's love for us, for the world, and for the reconciliation of all things. In such a context – in the connection we have with that much greater story – we can release the hold that our worries have on us. We can do that by talking with Jesus about them. In that conversation, we can learn to experience our worries in the context of his overwhelming love for us all, and trust him, because of his personal understanding of the anguish of worry. Christ is with us, always. Amen