

First Presbyterian Church
Genesis 12:1-3, "Covenant Promise: God's Answer for Order"
By Pastor Matt Johnson, 11/16/2023

Who here thinks of themselves as a problem solver?
I certainly do. I love thinking about a challenging problem
and dreaming up new ways of addressing it.

But sometimes we encounter problems that resist our initial attempts.
Then they resist our second and third attempts.
They persist not just through our lifetime,
but our children's and grandchildren's.
These kind of obstacles as "wicked problems."

A guy named C. West Churchman described these sort of problems
in the journal *Management Science* in 1967.
He explained that "The adjective 'wicked' is supposed to describe
the mischievous and even evil quality of these problems,
where proposed 'solutions' often
turn out to be worse than the symptoms".

Examples include climate change, the AIDS epidemic,
the ever increasing amount of space junk and the possibility that it will
create a cascading orbital catastrophe,
and the bind of technological advance in which one nation
feels forced to pursue a technology which may destroy us
for fear of someone else arriving at its potential benefits first.

Bringing order to our world that results in mutual flourishing and sustainable
patterns of life has certainly been a wicked problem for humanity.

Sometimes people are so compelled to have order
that they succumb to the empty promises of a dictator.
But the order of an authoritarian or an empire doesn't
produce the outcome people hope for.

We've seen that through our tour of Genesis 1-11.
You're probably tired of hearing me summarize all of this,
but learning is established by repetition!

Gen 1:1-2:3 Chaos is pushed back by God's ordering and humans are invited to join God as partners.

Gen. 2:4-4:27 What about a perfect world? Adam, Eve, and Cain fall victim to temptation, which leads to deceit and murder.

Gen. 5:1-6:8 What about development of technology? Human actions were only evil all the time.

Gen 6:9-9:23 What about hitting the reset button? Annihilation of all people and animals is inadequate to bring about lasting order.

Gen. 10:1-11:13 What about humanity controlling their own destiny?
The development of an empire where humans seek
to make a name for themselves and build a tower
to control the divine realm? Ends in scattering and confusion.

It's legitimate to wonder how humanity was supposed
to get out of this mess. It's truly a wicked problem –
one that each of us in this room, each of our families,
knows all too well.

In the chapter of God's story that we open up today,
we discover the astonishing answer that God has for the human predicament.
God's answer to ordering chaos in our lives
isn't found in a grand display of power and authority.

God's answer is a promise and a relationship that begins with one family.
God seeks out a couple named Abram and Sarai,
descended from Terah of Ur, a city that would be in modern day Iraq.
It wasn't human innovation or willpower that brought the answer,
but the initiation of God's love and blessing
which would hinge on the human heart responding with faith.

What an amazingly odd thing for God to do!
What does this decision tell us about God's way of acting in the world?
What does it reveal about God's patience and grace?

The world-altering promises which God to Abram
are listed in Genesis 12:1-3.

God will make Abram into a Great Nation and bless him.

God will also make his name great and he will be a blessing.

In fact, all families on earth will be blessed through him.

In a world marked by division,

Abram is to be an agent of blessing and integration.

In a world where people sought to “make a name for ourselves,”

Yahweh promises to make Abram’s name great.

And for decades ... *decades* ... that was it.

A promise. A hope. Nothing more.

Decades later, in Gen. 15,

God comes back for another conversation with Abram.

All these years later, Abram and Sarai still don’t have any children.

But God takes Abram outside and says,

“Look up at the milky way – how many thousands of thousands of stars
can you count? So shall your offspring be.”

Then comes v. 6, “**Abram believed God,**

and it was credited to him as ... righteousness.”

That is to say ... right relatedness.

There is a restoration of relationship here between God
and humanity that comes

not through humans doing things for God,

but by believing what God says

– through faith!

Through the promise of God and Abram’s faith response to God
we have a revived heartbeat in the relationship between
creator and creation.

When you take all this together,

we see that long after sin entered the world,

God is revealed to be a gracious, committed, loving person

who is active and engaged in relationship with humanity.

God won’t just swoop in and make everything better,

but is willing to put God’s own reputation on the line

in pursuing these beloved, wayward people.

(By the way -- does that sound a bit like Jesus to you?)

And humanity, as God's representatives on earth, made in the image of God,
haven't lost their way entirely.

Abram and Sarai have recognized that self-serving ambition
will bring destruction and confusion into the world.

They listen for God's voice, fight through times of unbelief,
and are willing to commit themselves to trusting God's vision
for the world.

And so it is that after the wondrous beauty of creation,
and the terrifying danger of the fall,
comes this third essential moment in the Story of God:
a covenanted commitment to find a way forward together.

God makes a covenant with them.

A covenant is a mutually binding set of commitments between people
that establishes the nature of their relationship.

God's covenant promise is to be with the descendants of Abraham and Sarah
in a way that leads to blessing for all families on earth.

That promise from Gen. 12 guides the whole story of Israel
all the way through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus,
who opens up a *new covenant*.

Through Jesus, humanity moves from a covenant based on the law,
and enters into the covenant of grace.

That's what we are as the church: a community formed in relationship with God
through the grace of Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Today we get to celebrate that through welcoming new members into
our congregation. Two will join by letter of transfer from another church.
And two will join by public declaration of faith in Christ
through the sacrament of Baptism.

The PC(USA) Book of Order says that

“Baptism is the **sign** and **seal** of incorporation into Christ.”

(Book of Order W-2.3001)

“Sign” refers to the idea that baptism is a *sign* of God’s work in the world.

Think of a sign you might see on the road that says,

“Historical Landmark Ahead – 1 mile.”

This sign isn’t the historical landmark itself.

It just points to the fact that there is a historical landmark up ahead.

In the same way, baptism itself isn’t the important thing—

what *God does* in our lives is the important thing baptism points to.

Secondly, “seal” refers to the idea that when this sign of God’s work is present, the Holy Spirit has sealed the promises of God to the baptized person.

This use of the word “seal” is like the old stamp of authentication that a king or queen might put on official correspondence.

Today when we need this we go to a notary public to get a document authenticated.

In baptism we get God’s guarantee that relationship with Jesus

(or “incorporation into Jesus” as the paragraph puts it)

is promised to the baptized person.

So baptism is like God’s notary public.

It is a seal that authenticates God’s invitation for this person to join the covenant community we call the church.

Baptism signifies

- the faithfulness of God,
- the washing away of sin,
- rebirth,
- putting on the fresh garment of Christ,
- being sealed by God's Spirit,
- adoption into the covenant family of the Church,
- resurrection and illumination in Christ.

(<http://www.pcusa.org/101/101-infant.htm>)

Joining the family of God through baptism is God’s answer to the wicked problem of chaos.

When we trust God’s way of grace and put aside our own attempts to control our lives, we find a pathway back to the Garden of Eden.

Most of us are not being baptized here today,
but we do have opportunity to celebrate the Lord's Supper.
When we do that, we show that we accept by faith
the promises made to them in their baptism.

The body of Christ is one, and Baptism is the bond of unity in Christ. As they are united with Christ through faith, Baptism unites the people of God with each other and with the church of every time and place. Barriers of race, gender, status, and age are to be transcended. Barriers of nationality, history, and practice are to be overcome.

Baptism enacts and seals what the Word proclaims: God's redeeming grace offered to all people. Baptism is God's gift of grace and also God's summons to respond to that grace. Baptism calls to repentance, to faithfulness, and to discipleship. Baptism gives the church its identity and commissions the church for ministry to the world.

(Book of Order W-2.3005-6)

God's ways are not our ways.
God's patience exceeds our patience.
As we celebrate Baptism and the Lord's Supper today,
I invite you to turn over to God the places where you seek
your own way of problem solving,
and embrace God's eternal solution
to wicked problems.