



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL  
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST  
Stockbridge, Massachusetts

## *Take the Next Step*

**March 17, 2019**

**Text: Genesis 15: 1-2**

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.



**Sermon:**

In her landmark book, *Texts of Terror*, Phyllis Tribble writes about texts that rather than be liberating as the Gospel is, rather than lifting people up and setting them free have been used to keep people down and push people down. She writes that we ought to wrestle with those texts; we need to confront them, just as Jacob wrestled with God. Beyond those texts, however, are words in the Bible that are good words—great words that strike fear in our hearts, not because others use them to keep us down, but rather because we are afraid that we can never measure up to them. And one of those words reckoned onto Abram, is one that will end this first part of our reading today. It’s the word *righteousness*.

In the Bible there are many words like righteousness that are good and beautiful and holy, yet leave us wondering whether we could ever live up to such a standard. If you read Matthew’s Gospel, for example, Jesus doesn’t tell us just to be good, Jesus tells us to be perfect. And if perfect isn’t enough, be perfect as God is perfect. Sometimes I wonder if I can ever do that. Of course, in John’s Gospel, Jesus speaks of love, right? But he doesn’t talk just about your neighbor, which we might be able to imagine on a good day. No in John’s Gospel, Jesus says, Love your enemy!” That gets a little bit harder. Then in Micah—what does the Lord require of you? It’s not what does the Lord *ask* of you; it’s not what does the Lord *want* of you, and not what would be dandy if you could do but rather what does the Lord *require* of you? Although it may flow off our lips, I wonder what would happen if we let it settle in our hearts? It becomes a little bit intimidating because Micah says, the Lord requires that we do justice, that we love kindness, and that we walk humbly with God. On any day, if I do

two out of those three things, I think I'm doing pretty well and yet, if we asked the kids in school, they would tell us that two out of three rates a "D" or a "D minus."

Then there is this word you've heard in this reading, *righteousness*. Abram was righteous. Let me see a show of hands, how many of you out there are feeling righteous? (No one raises their hand.) In my experience, it represents one of those words that none of us feel we ever live up to, even if we believe the person sitting next to us in the pew has figured it out. Yet, I will point out that the person sitting next to you didn't raise their hand either. Righteousness evokes these images of holiness—of a life that we might somehow never get to and therefore, we might be judged for our lack of righteousness. But what we need to know is that in the Hebrew Scriptures, that word means a number of different things at different times, but righteousness is never viewed as a final product. It is never considered that thing that once we figure it out, we go on living it forever. It is for the same reason that we go on confessing our sins every Sunday morning because between the time that we've laid those sins down and returned on the following week—I know that I will have sinned again.

In Genesis, righteousness is about an unfolding; it is about a trusting—and that is what is at the heart of this story. God reckoned it to Abram as righteousness. Although we're only in the fifteenth chapter of Genesis, this is not the first time that someone has been called righteous. Can anyone else remember who was called righteous? (Noah). Thank you, Reverend Doctor Rick. I can always ask these questions because I know that someone out there will be able to answer. You remember Noah! You know, the one who built the ark. That Noah. Noah believed. He trusted in God. He gave his whole life force over something entrusted to him—building the ark in the middle of dry land. That act would certainly have subjected him to the ridicule of others and likely made him scandalous. With him, righteousness did not imply that he was perfect but rather that he was trusting he would follow God's path that God had laid out for him—even if it meant building a giant boat in the middle of land-locked land.

The children here could probably tell you that story about the ark. Noah gets on with all the animals and they ride out that storm for forty days and then they find dry land. And when they do, Noah makes a sacrifice to God. He offers up a burnt sacrifice of some animals and God finds it pleasing. And do you know how long Noah remained blameless after that sacrifice? About six verses. Then he too falls away. That does not mean that Noah ceased being righteous, for righteousness is not a one and done—rather it is an unfolding and a becoming.

The character in today's story—Abram—was the one who was simply in his field when God said to him, "Go, Abram, go." Go from the safety and security of your family; go from the wealth and prosperity of your father; go and I will show you the land. And what was Abram's response? "Here I am." I will go. Abram went. If you read the story of Abram, it is fascinating. He sets out on his journey. Maybe these are

things we expect from God or at least trust that when they happen, (though it may sound idolatrous), Abram becomes richly rewarded; wealth and power come his way; his flocks increase. Backing up before this passage, Abram and his family will have defeated not just one king but several kings in the Near East in battle, something which on paper he should have been grounded. He had seen God at work in amazing and powerful ways but it isn't until this moment—this moment of being promised children—this moment of having descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky—it is not until this moment that Abram's following rises to a level of righteousness.

Remember righteousness is trusting—it is following—it is giving your life force to things like building that boat in the middle of dry land. I wonder what it was that got God's attention. At this point Abram was not a young man nor was his wife. I imagine that they had tried all their lives to have children. They had even given life to a child through Hagar, and yet it was here in this moment where Abram had given up on everything—when everything that was in his power—when he had finally made peace with the fact that he could do nothing about it. It was in that moment when he believed, that righteousness unfolded. For him to tell his wife and everyone in his great following that he was going to become a father would have probably elicited the same reaction as Noah hammering on that ark. Abram and Noah were united in their belief and in their response. If you look up the definition of the word righteousness, in this context it is the idea of trust, even when trust seems unwise.

In my clergy lectionary group, someone shared a definition of righteousness as simply taking that next step—even if you can't see what that step involves. Imagine taking a step into dense fog—that is what faith and righteousness is, and I think Abram's gift to us this morning, which is a gift in these difficult times we're living in—is that this is an issue that, for all intents and purposes, Abram could have given up on. He had tried to have a kid for so long and it wasn't happening. Maybe it would have been better just to give in and move on. And I wonder about our experience in today's world, where we have candles lit yet again—for people whose lives were cut short—for people who fell victim to violence—whether here at home or terrorism abroad. How long will we have to keep lighting those candles. Isn't it ridiculous just to light candles? What could they possibly do? Here's what I know. What is there to do except to trust? We take that next step, even if it's foggy. Even if the issue seems bigger than us—still we take that next step—even if we're ready to give up on it all because there's nothing we can do about it. We light those candles; we keep lighting those candles, and each one of us will be invited to light one a little bit later.

But it isn't just the faith that joins Abram and Noah together. There is something else that profoundly matters to our life together, and that is the idea of covenant. The earliest two covenants between God and the people come through Noah and through Abram. How both of them happen is critically important. If you children remember Noah and the flood—when Noah comes to dry ground, God says, "I'm going to make

a promise to you. I promise that I will never do that again.” And what is the sign of that promise—do you remember? God puts something in the sky—what is it? I trust that our Noah sitting in the pews knows the answer to that, right? It’s a rainbow.

But here’s the thing: the rainbow is not just some pretty thing for us to gaze at. Think about a rainbow for a moment. It has “rain and bow”; it is like a bow and arrow. Which way is it pointing? Yes, it’s point up. God makes a promise with us that God will never do that again; God will spare the world that kind of destruction, and the promise that is made is a bow aimed straight at God, not at us. What comes next is how the covenant happens between Abram and God. Here’s what you need to know about it. God says to Abram, “I want you to go and get me some animals and prepare those animals.” And Abram would have known the stories of Noah and would have anticipated that this was some kind of sacrifice or promise making. To make a covenant in that time was literally to *cut* a covenant. Animals would be sliced in two, and the two people making the covenant would walk between those animals as a way of knowing that “If I break this covenant—if either of us breaks this covenant, then what’s happened to those animals happens to me.” Entering into a covenant was serious business with huge outcomes. So listen and recognize how this covenant is made like that rainbow in heaven, where the bow is aimed at God. In this case, God causes Abram to fall into a deep sleep and he does not participate at all in this covenant, and it is God alone who walked through those animals with a torch of light—just like the light going before the Israelites leaving Egypt. It is God who will travel through, saying that my covenant and promise to you shall always be there, and I will bear the brunt of it and the pain when this covenant goes awry.

Friends, in Lent we remember the story of just how far God is willing to go with that covenant—just how much at risk God is willing to put God’s Self out there—that we might keep lighting candles, that we might keep having faith, and that we might keep believing. Sometimes we get caught up on how much of it is us—how much of it is righteous but listen to the rest of this story. Hear how this earliest, most fundamental covenant that God makes with all of humanity manages to unfold.

“ 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 Lord GOD, 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, 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 the LORD 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.’”



*The Rev. Brent Damrow Pastor*