

Lord, help us to hear You, to believe You, to receive You. Amen.

This bible of ours is not for the squeamish.

Our sacred story is rather blood-soaked, based as it is on a legal system
in which promises are sealed in sacrifices, not signatures.

But then, we live in a rather blood-soaked world, as the news tells us daily.

Our salvation story is of humanity’s tendency to get what it wants by any means...
and how a loving Creator sought to win us back into the embrace of love.

Where human beings are involved, as the movie title says, “There will be blood.”

And there is blood here, in this first formal covenant God makes with Abraham,
still called Abram – God renames him later.

As is the case with all God’s covenants, this one is unconditional.

God does all the promising.

The first promise is of protection and reward. The Lord says to Abram in a vision:

“Fear not. I am a shield to you. Your reward shall be very great.”

But Abram, like most of us, is pretty specific about what form he would like this
reward to take, and he is quick to point it out to God:

“What on earth can you give me, that would mean anything at all, since I shall die
childless! Since you have granted me no offspring, my servant will be my heir.”

This is the kind of relationship Abram has with God, that he can speak from his
heart, not censoring, not putting it into polite language, just speaking from
his gut: “Hey! You have not given me what I consider to be the most important
thing in the whole world! I am nothing without an heir.

You haven’t given me one. Why should I listen to you?”

And this is the kind of relationship God has with Abram – that he takes it.

God doesn’t say, “You can’t talk to me like that!”

He doesn’t say, “I have given you life, what more do you want?”

God answers Abram. God hears him and answers him, gently, firmly.

God takes Abram outside and has him look up and count the stars.

“So many shall your offspring be,” He says.

He tells a childless old man that he will have descendents too numerous to count.

And here’s the real miracle: Abraham believes him.

This is the kind of relationship Abram has with God – Abram has walked so closely with God that he can argue with him, but also trust him, even when he makes a promise that to our ears sounds preposterous.

Abram doesn't say, "That's a cruel joke to play on an old man."

Abram doesn't say, "Yeah, I'll believe it when I see it."

Abram doesn't even say, "How?" He believes this promise, and *because he believed in the Lord, God reckoned it to his merit.*

This is the big moment for Christians buried here in Genesis, chapter 15, verse 6:

This verse, this event, became the foundation of a central teaching of St. Paul:

That we are saved by faith alone, not through any goodness or action of ours, but solely through believing. It wasn't anything that Abram did that was credited to him as righteousness, like assets in a ledger.

It was his believing in God's promise that made him righteous in God's eyes.

Just read through Genesis – Abram is not particularly righteous on his own. But he trusted God's plan, even when it made no sense to him.

That is what it means to live by faith:

To trust God's promises, even when they make no sense.

Trust God's strategies, not our own power-plays.

Jesus' parables are full of things that make no sense from a human point of view.

He keeps saying, "Trust God, not your own self-saving strategies. Do it God's way."

Jesus asks no more and no less of us than what God asked of Abraham:

that we believe His promises. Nothing else.

Believing, especially in things we can't see, goes against human nature.

And many of us are not really comfortable with a system of unearned gift.

Give us an arrangement where we can earn our points,

where our reward is owed to us by the sweat of our brow.

At heart, most of us prefer contracts to covenants. In contracts we are equal parties. In contracts we can negotiate the terms, do our part, and it's clear.

Contracts do not imply relationship. Covenants do.

The way God has set it up, he has offered us covenants, unconditional covenants, in which God makes all the promises and takes on the burdens.

In the Old Covenant, aka, Old Testament, and in the New, it is God who initiates and it is God who pays the price of the sacrifice required to seal the deal.

Let's look again at this covenant scene in the Abraham story.

After the promise of children, God goes on to make Abram a third promise, that he will be given the Land he has journeyed to.

This too Abram believes, but this time he asks, “How will I know?” and God answers with this sacrificial ceremony.

Now the way this covenant is formalized uses a ritual common in the Ancient Near East at that time – this bizarre cutting in half of the sacrificial animals goes back to covenant ceremonies of the 2nd millennium BC.

This bloody ceremony is what scholars call a “self-maledictory oath” – the parties to the covenant would walk between these cut up animals to signify their agreement that this is what should happen to them if they violate the covenant – if the covenant is broken like the bodies of these sacrificial animals, they should be broken the same way. It’s violent and clear.

Now in our story, Abram provides the animals, cuts them up and lays them out. He is very serious about this – he sits watch over them, chasing away birds of prey who want to eat the carcasses.

But then a very deep sleep comes over him, and a great dread.

That’s one clue that God is near

God speaks to him, and then something truly amazing occurs:

A smoking firepot with a flaming torch appears and moves down the line between the pieces. That’s another clue that this is God, because in the Hebrew Bible there are many times when God manifests himself in the form of fire.

So it is God, not Abram, who walks between the pieces – meaning, the penalty will fall on him if the covenant is broken.

God has bound his divine power, in a sense, to make fast the covenant with us.

God did the same thing in the New Covenant that he has made with us through Christ. He met the terms of the Old Covenant.

He himself provided the offering for the sacrifice, his own son, who was broken on the cross, just as the covenant ceremony signified would happen if the covenant was broken.

Jesus, sitting on a hill overlooking Jerusalem, laments this broken covenant, knowing he will soon pay the price with his own blood:

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!”

It was not God who broke the covenant, but we ourselves, over and over.
But it was not we who paid the price, but God Himself, in Christ.

This Jesus who is revered as a model of non-violence – the model for Gandhi,
the model for Martin Luther King, Jr.; this Prince of Peace who never attacked
anyone becomes the victim of the violence we call the Cross.

A willing victim, going deep into the heart of evil to break its hold.

Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross was the end of the system of blood sacrifice
that had operated until then.

In Christ the New Covenant was born, which ended all previous covenants.

It was sealed in His blood – and never needs to be repeated.

We celebrate our freedom in this meal we share each Sunday,
but we do not repeat his sacrifice.

It was once, and for all – for all time, for all humanity, for all creation.

Jesus paid the price in blood so that we can be free in relationship with God –

And God set us free to be in relationship with him, and with each other.

The one question before us, today, and every day of our lives, is:

How do I live, now that I don't have anything to earn, anything to prove?

Now that we no longer need to seal covenants in blood, how do we end the
bloodshed? How do we become agents of reconciliation who help put an end to
the culture of violence that threatens to undo us as people made in God's image?

We don't have to live in a world where people die violently from automatic
gunfire at prayer, at play, in school. We are people who of God's promise!

[We can bear witness to life without violence at the Vigil April 8th during National
Crime Victims Rights Week, and the reception we're hosting afterward.]

We are called to extend God's promises to those who think they have to
earn their own way, to impose their will on others at gun point, at knife point,
or by wielding economic and political power.

We are called to we learn to speak with people who think, or pray, or vote
differently than us. We are people who wield God's power – which sometimes
looks like weakness and vulnerability, but is the most powerful force there is!

This promise sealed in Christ does not end with us. As agents of reconciliation,

We are to pass it on, in love, in generosity, in humility, in joy, in peace.

The blood ends here. Here the love begins. Amen.

Genesis 15:1-12,17-18

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 toward 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 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 turtledove, 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 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."

Luke 13:31-35 (New International Version)

31At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, "Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you."

32He replied, "Go tell that fox, 'I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.' 33In any case, I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!"

34"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! 35Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"