

Genesis 13

So Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that he had and Lot with him, into the Negeb. Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold. He journeyed on by stages from the Negeb as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, to the place where he had made an altar at the first, and there Abram called on the name of the Lord. Now Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents, and the land could not support both of them living together because their possessions were so great that they could not live together. Thus strife arose between the herders of Abram's livestock and the herders of Lot's livestock. At that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites lived in the land.

Then Abram said to Lot, "Let there be no strife between you and me and between your herders and my herders, for we are kindred. Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right, or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left." Lot looked about him and saw that the plain of the Jordan was well watered everywhere like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, in the direction of Zoar; this was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. So Lot chose for himself all the plain of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed eastward, and they separated from each other. Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled among the cities of the plain and moved his tent as far as Sodom. Now the people of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord.

The Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. Rise up, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you." So Abram moved his tent and came and settled by the oaks^[a] of Mamre, which are at Hebron, and there he built an altar to the Lord.

Good morning, friends,

Our journey through Genesis continues today, with the story of Abram and Lot. So far this fall we've explored an overview of Genesis and creation with Rabbi Ostrich, as well as the stories of Adam and Eve, Noah and the flood, and God calling Abram and Sarai.

We've been reminded on this journey of the complexity of this ancient text. That it is messy at times, perhaps best not understood as a historic or scientific document, and yet we've also seen the beauty of a text that can invite us to wrestle with the stories in its pages, to uncover deeper truths about things like covenant relationships and seeking to follow God even when we mess up. And the weightiness of being part of the people of God who have been blessed in order to be a blessing.

Last week Karen Rath led the adults in a conversation after the service in which

we explored some of the tensions that we feel in this sacred text, and that despite spending time with numerous stories, it leaves us still with even more questions about how we might interpret its pages - perhaps even that there are parts that we still find really difficult, or even do not like.

It should be no surprise that today's scripture passage had me feeling like there were multiple sermons that could be written. We have a passage in front of us that includes the following, and I'll put up our map again for a refresher...

- (SLIDE) That first arrow is Abram and Lot and their families leaving Egypt, a place that got Abram embroiled in political scandal, mixed messages, and confusion, yet this experience allows him to leave as a rich man.
- That second arrow is Abram traveling through the Negeb desert with Lot and returning to the place when God first spoke to him.
- This land, once thought to be fertile and plentiful, turns out to be insufficient for Abram and Lot's growing families and resources - especially given their herder challenges as Marvin discussed during Children's Time.
- Abram proposes a separation to create peace, and Lot jumps at the chance to go their separate ways. (SLIDE)
- God gives a new promise that Abram's offspring will be more numerous than grains of sand, spreading out in all directions. (SLIDE)

Is this a story about family conflict, or perhaps one about peace at all costs? Is it a story about land use and wealth, or maybe one about security and sustainability?

Perhaps due to our ongoing fall election season, I could feel myself writing messages that felt like they were taking partisan sides.

I found myself thinking – what might an elephant (SLIDE), a noble beast that appreciates traditional values and surefootedness think about this passage?

Let me put on my symbolic red tie...

Perhaps the elephant sermon might focus on Lot, (SLIDE) how he should have taken ownership in the squabbles with his uncle. (SLIDE) Rather than taking the offer to separate, he should have fought to maintain the family relationship

(SLIDE) - so deeply important in that ancient near eastern society. He should have humbled himself to his uncle's direction, (SLIDE) rather than being paumpus enough to think that he as the younger should be the one to choose the path. Maybe he should have offered his own wealth (SLIDE) to help offset some of the tensions, perhaps proposing that they hire more laborers to extend their family land even further. And if the decision was made to separate, to leave knowing that his hard work and determination (SLIDE) were enough to stand on his own. If Lot had the sensibility of an elephant, he would have realized that (SLIDE) nothing is more important than family, and maintaining family connections.

On the other hand, let me put on my symbolic blue tie...

What might a donkey sermon look like, (SLIDE) a determined beast that appreciates forward progress and momentum? Perhaps the donkey sermon might focus on Abram, (SLIDE) soon to be labeled as Abraham, how humble (SLIDE) he was in offering choice in the midst of tension. Rather than holding his nephew to an ancient standard, he gracefully offered separation (SLIDE) as a way to save the family relationship. He had the foresight (SLIDE) to pause and remember the failings of his past, using that information to imagine a new course of action. Perhaps there is a message here about sharing wealth (SLIDE) being more sustainable than hoarding it in one place. If Abraham had acted any other way, (SLIDE) he probably would have destroyed the frailty of the fabric of their family.

If our current political context has taught us anything though, it's that hardline partisan stances don't often help us find our way.

I thought back to Bethany's beautiful Church Around the Table reflection about the covenant relationship highlighted in the Noah story. (SLIDE) Our particular group was fascinated with that story for a variety of reasons. The kids in our group were both curious and skeptical about a global flood, and bothered by the absolute destruction of all of humanity, noting that no human being is entirely good or entirely evil. We talked about the many different ways that rainbows make us feel and imagine. But the part of our conversation that stuck with me most since then is the idea of relationships built around covenant and commitment. Not so much how we might hold on to that commitment, but what

happens when those covenants get messy? Our group wondered how God's promise to never destroy the earth with a flood might feel for those suffering from flooding. It hit me again with the news of Helene making landfall this week. Does this mean God's covenant has been broken for those folks in Florida, Georgia, the Carolinas, and now Virginia and Tennessee? How does that feel, and how will they hear that Genesis story in the aftermath?

Abram and Lot are in a covenant relationship of sorts. (SLIDE) At the age of 75, Abram leaves his homeland, bringing his nephew Lot with him. Genesis doesn't tell us why Lot was chosen to accompany his uncle, but he becomes part of the journey, an epic one in a moment in history without modern transportation. Lot is along for the ride during famine, when Abram takes his complicated journey through Egypt, and through the building of family wealth and return to the Promised Land. Needless to say, they were in it through thick and thin.

And yet when conflict arises, they go their separate ways. Why? We know that religious history is filled with moments of separation and new identity. Jesus' mostly Jewish followers separate and become the earliest Christians. The establishment of early church structures led to church leaders disagreeing over theological stances, separating and forming their own branches and sects. Our peace church tradition grows out of the Reformation, where Protestant and Anabaptist traditions break away from Orthodox Christianity. Even in moments when denominational traditions merged, as when the General Conference Mennonites merged with the Old Mennonite Church, we decided instead to separate along geographical lines forming Mennonite Church of Canada, and MCUSA. And in the 20 plus years since then, we've watched as many of our siblings in Christ have chosen to separate from these newly formed denominations over our ongoing theological differences. It seems inevitable that covenant relationships eventually break apart.

And yet we also have countless examples of when we've urged one another to hold on to relationships during the most difficult of times. With the recent news that Mosaic Mennonite Conference is the most recent grouping of churches to decide to disconnect from Mennonite Church USA, I find myself wishing they would stick around, and lament that they have chosen the easy way out to disconnect when they disagree.

When it comes to marriage, for much of Christian history, the church has urged couples to stay united, sometimes in the midst of horrible circumstances, and sometimes at the price of tolerating spousal abuse and mistreatment. We might wring our hands about how relationships seem to have become disposable or upgradeable relationships, lamenting the good old days when a commitment was a commitment. Yet we also notice the new life that sometimes comes from moving beyond a broken or abusive relationship.

Our current American politics often suggest that we're either in or out. Red tie or blue tie. We choose a side and entrench ourselves, searching for what defines our differences rather than where we find common ground.

Perhaps the crux of today's story isn't about who was in the right, or which side or which pathway was the correct one. Perhaps it isn't a way to sort out if this is more of a donkey story or an elephant story, but a reminder to pause and really discern what the way forward might be.

Perhaps there is a third way to navigate this text. Maybe I need a purple tie.

After a week wrestling with this text, I kept going back to the fact that this story is bookended by two altar experiences. Abram arrives back in the Promised Land from Egypt, and visits the place where God spoke to him, where he had built an altar. The text says when he returned there he called on the name of the Lord. And then at the end of the chapter, after Lot has gone his separate way, God speaks to Abram again, and Abram pauses to build an altar, bookending this moment in time.

An altar is not an impulsive thing. It takes time to collect the materials and build the intended shape. It takes time to figure out what might be the offering placed on the altar, and then more time to ceremoniously ignite, then burn, then allow the embers to grow cold. An altar is intentional.

What would it mean for us, in the midst of tense moments, to pause enough to build an altar? (SLIDE) Perhaps not a literal one built of rocks and stones, but a symbolic one allowing us to pause, take a deep breath, speak to God, and consider the pathway forward. Perhaps in those moments Abram felt a nudge

from God to offer Lot the choice. Perhaps in that space after Lot had gone on his way, God provided Abram with comfort and peace that despite the separation, things would unfold in ways he never imagined.

Friends, perhaps this is what we are doing just now, as we pause enough to reflect on these ancient stories, as we work on visioning together to imagine who we might be as a congregation moving forward. Perhaps as we seek God, and the peace that comes from God, we can continue to offer altar spaces to each other, to intentionally pause, reflect, speak aloud our prayers and concerns to God, and to discern where we go from here.

We move now into our sharing time, an intentional altar that we have built here at UMC, to share intentionally with each other. We will begin with images from our past weeks, sharing glimpses of the joy that we have discovered in our lives.

May we find God as we pause to reflect, and may God bless us as we continue our journey.