“Believe”

Genesis 15

October 9, 2016, David M. Griebner, Riverside UMC

This fall we are looking at six scriptures, three from the Old Testament and three from the New Testament. Together these six passages capture the core story of the Bible. And what is this message? What is this story that drives the Bible from beginning to end? *We need a Savior. We need to be rescued.* Why do we need a Savior? Why do we need to be rescued? As we learned last week from Genesis 3 and the story of Adam and Eve, we have an enemy, an adversary, often called the evil one or the devil in the Bible. And the goal of our enemy, our adversary, is to separate us from God in any way he can.

Today we are going to talk about how God works in our life to keep us close, and deal with the things that pull us away. Genesis 15 gives us two pictures of this. One is a big picture and the other is a little picture. I want to deal with the big picture first.

**The Big Picture** –The second half of Genesis 15 describes what some might see as a kind of macabre scene. But this is actually why I selected this passage for this series, and why I put it in the lineup. God asks Abraham (In this chapter his name is still Abram. God won’t change his name to Abraham until Genesis 17, but I think it will be easier for us if I jump the gun a bit) to gather some animals, a heifer, a goat, a ram, a dove and a pigeon. For all us city folk, according to Google a heifer is young female cow that hasn’t yet had a calf. Then God tells Abraham to cut them all in two and put them into two lines.

What is going on here? What is this? It’s a covenant ceremony. In the ancient world this is how you entered into an important agreement. It was used to establish the terms of peace between nations. It was used to spell out a business deal. And it was used to bind a man and a woman in marriage. Our United Methodist marriage ceremony still uses the word today. We say, “The covenant of marriage was established by God…”

So here’s what’s going on. God is establishing His covenant with Abraham, and ultimately with all of us, the whole human race. In Genesis 12 God spoke to Abraham. He told Abraham that he would bless him, and that through him and his children, Israel, God would bless the whole world. However, right now Abraham can’t see it. Right now all he can see is he doesn’t have a son, much less a nation. Both Abraham and Sarah are getting older. And he’s anxious. He’s worried. I suspect he may even feel like he was separated from God. And think about what I said a moment ago about our adversary. Who would want to do this? Who would want to separate Abraham from God and what God wanted to do through him?

So God decided to make a covenant with Abraham to reassure him of the promises He made. Now here’s the symbolism of the dead animals. When you entered into a covenant what you were saying went something like this: ‘In making this covenant, I put my life on the line. If I break it you can make me like these dead animals.’ And then, to seal the deal, each party was supposed to walk down the middle, between the dead animals. But that isn’t what happens here. And this is where this story gains its real power. As night falls Abraham is put into, a deep, deep sleep. And while he is asleep a “smoking firepot” and a “blazing torch” both pass between the dead animals.

What’s going on? Here’s the last piece of the puzzle. Both the firepot and the torch represent God. Of course God doesn’t come down and physically walk between the animals. But both the firepot and the torch stand in for Him. Here’s the point. Abraham does not walk. Instead God walks twice, once for Himself and once for Abraham *and for all of us*. In other words God says, ‘If I break this covenant, this promise, I will die. And if you, Abraham, or you humanity, break this promise I will also die.’ God puts Himself on the line for both of us. God says if I break this covenant, I will die, and if you break this covenant, if you mess this up, if you drop the ball, I’ll die for that too. In other words, whatever happens, God says ‘I will accept all the consequences.’ Oh, my goodness.

Can you see where this leads us? Think of Jesus. Think of His death on the cross. Jesus, the Word of God, the second person of the Trinity, died for us, not because God broke the covenant, but because we broke the covenant, not because God couldn’t keep it, but because we couldn’t keep it, not because He sinned, but because we sinned.

Right here, just fifteen chapters into the Bible, God shows us how He is going to rescue us, how He is going to save us, years and years later. He is going to die in our place for our sins. On the cross God going to give Jesus everything we ever did wrong, all our sin, all our brokenness, all our disobedience, every mistake, every shortcoming, everything dark and dirty. And then, when we put our faith in Him God is going to give us all Jesus’ righteousness, all His innocence, and His perfect standing with the Father.

We don’t walk; God walks for both of us. That’s how God rescues us, that’s how God saves us. And that’s the big, big picture.

**The Little Picture ­–** So what’s the little picture? Well, that’s actually the first half of this chapter. It starts off with God attempting to reassure Abraham. “Don’t be afraid,” God says. “I’m your shield,” God says. God is trying to reassure Abraham that He is still there for him. But in response Abraham says, ‘That’s all very fine, but what about my boy? What about the son you promised me?’ Genesis 15 begins with anxiety, worry, fear, and uncertainty. Abraham and Sarah are old and getting older and Abraham needs something more from God. So, still trying to reassure him, God asks Abraham to look at the stars. ‘Count them if you can,’ He says. That’s how many your children will be.’ And for a moment it works, Abraham accepts this picture of his future. He believes. But then, just a moment later, his anxiety resurfaces. His doubt comes back. “How will I know?” he asks.

And that’s when God asks him to cut those animals in half. So here’s the little picture. You can talk to God like this. And God will talk to you like that. You can talk to Him about heaven and hell and life and death and all the big things, but you can also talk to Him about how you are worried about making ends meet, or whether you will make your flight, or if you will be called back for a second interview, and on and on. God will meet us wherever we are.

Let me illustrate this by taking us to another place in scripture, John chapter 11. In John 11 we have the story of Lazarus, how he died and how Jesus brought him back to life. Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary were good friends with Jesus. Word comes to Jesus that Lazarus has died. After a short delay Jesus goes to their home. Martha is the first meet Him. She says, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” In response Jesus says, “Your brother will rise again.” Then Martha says “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” Then Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?” Finally, Martha says, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.” (John 11:21-27)

A few minutes later, Jesus meets Mary, Martha’s sister. When Mary sees Jesus she says the same thing, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” But Jesus’ response is different. Jesus doesn’t comfort Mary with a theological argument. This time the Bible simply says he was “deeply moved in spirit and troubled,” and He wept. Here’s the point. Martha needed an explanation; Mary needed tears. Martha needed words; Mary needed a hug. And Jesus gave them both exactly what they needed. (John 11:32-35)

How does God save us? How does God rescue us? He saves us and rescues us in the biggest way we can imagine. He walks for both of us. On the cross He took our sin and gave it to Jesus, and when we accept His Son, when we believe Him, He takes Jesus’ righteousness and gives it to us. He walks for both of us.

But, He also rescues us in little ways, moment-by-moment, emotion-by-emotion, thought-by-thought, worry by worry. He knows that even though we have accepted the big story of His death on the cross, we can still fall away because of the little things we have to deal with every day. But just as he did for Abraham and just as He did for Martha and for Mary God longs to give us what we need, when we need it, no matter how small or incidental it may seem to us.

What do you need? Is there something that feels like it has come or may come between you and the Lord? Is there a part of you that feels let down or forgotten? Is there something that feels like it is not going to work out? Or may not happen? Is there something in your heart that you can’t let go of, or you can’t sort out? Maybe even something that feels impossible? Is there something you are trying to shoulder all by yourself? A place where you’ve given up?

Where do you need God to walk for you? Where do you need Him to bring His rescue home? What do you need from the Savior?

Believe. Believe He can rescue. Believe He can save. Believe He will answer. Believe. Let’s pray…