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Lent Day 3: The Darkness

4-5 minutes

Genesis 15:7-12, 17-21 (ESV)

Then he said to him, "I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it."

And he said, "Lord God, how shall I know that I will inherit it?"

So he said to him, "Bring me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." Then he brought all these to him and cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him. ...

And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces. On the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying:

"To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates — the Kenites, the Kenezites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites."

Genesis 15 presents one of the most remarkable if not macabre episodes in the life of Abraham.

For a nomad, the promise of a land to possess would have been both comforting as well as difficult to believe, so it is only natural that Abraham would respond to God's promise (v. 7: "I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess") with a request for assurance (v. 8: "How am I to know that I shall possess it?"). What is surprising is not the request, but the sign that God provides.

Animals are brought before God, split in two, and then arrayed before him. The writer makes clear that as the sun goes down, Abram does not merely fall asleep, but experiences a "dreadful and great darkness." In the thick darkness, a smoking fire pot and flaming torch pass between the pieces and the episode ends with the statement, "On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram" (v. 18).

What is going on?!? In the Ancient Near East, when parties entered a covenant it was often dramatized by a sacrifice or some other enactment of the penalty that would fall on the party who did not keep up their end of the bargain. This signified that both parties were willing to honor the arrangement at the possible expense of their lives — their fate would be the same as that of the animals. In the darkness Abraham witnesses God (represented as a fire pot and torch) passing through the pieces, and yet he himself is not required to!

The gospel writers note that when Jesus died, darkness fell over the land, and in that moment, we see the sacrifice God made in order to honor his promises to us. It is a reminder that he went to

the grave to give us the skies, became alienated to give us a home, and experienced deep darkness to bring us into the light. In fact, this vision is what comforted Abraham's fear in Genesis 15:1 ("Fear not, Abram, I am your shield."). Is this your comfort too?

Prayer

Father, remind me that because Jesus experienced the darkness, you have shown me your light; because he experienced alienation, you have promised me a home; because he experienced the grave, you have given me the skies. And help me not to be afraid, because you are my shield and very great reward. In Christ's Name, Amen.

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