

The Economy of God – 10.14.18

Psalm 127

A song of ascents. Of Solomon.

¹ Unless the Lord builds the house,
the builders labor in vain.

Unless the Lord watches over the city,
the guards stand watch in vain.

² In vain you rise early
and stay up late,
toiling for food to eat—
for he grants sleep to^[a] those he loves.

Genesis 15 New International Version (NIV)

The Lord's Covenant With Abram

15 After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision:

“Do not be afraid, Abram.

I am your shield,^[a]
your very great reward.^[b]”

² But Abram said, “Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit^[c] my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?” ³ And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”

⁴ Then the word of the Lord came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.” ⁵ He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring^[d] be.”

⁶ Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

⁷ He also said to him, “I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.”

⁸ But Abram said, “Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?”

⁹ So the Lord said to him, “Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.”

¹⁰ Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half.¹¹ Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away.

¹² As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. ¹³ Then the Lord said to him, “Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there. ¹⁴ But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. ¹⁵ You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age. ¹⁶ In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.”

¹⁷ When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. ¹⁸ On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, “To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi^[e] of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates—

I can just hear that first conversation between Abram and Sarai, can't you?

Abram: Sarai?

Sarai: (absently) Yes, dear?

Abram: Um, Sarai, I have something I need to talk with you about.

Sarai: Yes, dear—what is it? (Thinking to herself that it had better not be another comment about that meat from last night—it WAS tough but that's because the meat was sketchy when she got it)—

Abram: Sarai, the Lord has spoken to me!

Sarai: Who, dear?

Abram: The Lord. God. You know, the one whose name we can never say...

Sarai: Abram, I told you not to drink that wine the shepherds sell you. There's no telling what's in that stuff and now it's made you crazy!

Abram: No, it's true. The Lord came to me and told me that we have to leave this place and go to a land the Lord will show me. And we will have children! God said I would be father to a generation!

Sarai: Abram, how old are you?

Abram: 75, I think—possibly 74?

Sarai: You're 75. And how old am I?

Abram: Is this a trick question? You are as beautiful as the day I married you!

Sarai: I'm the same as you, you old goat—what are the chances that, at this point in my life, I am going to have a baby?

Abram: Sarai, I don't know what to tell you. The Lord was very clear—we are going to start a new people in a new land—land God is going to show us and then give to us! And God said that our descendants will be numbered like the stars!

At that point, I can imagine what Sarai might have mumbled under her breath, and I can't imagine that it was either optimistic or charitable. Still, she packed up and went with him. The narrative of the lives of Abram and Sarai are extraordinary—complicated and, at times, quite strange. What begins to emerge out of them, by chapter 15 of the book of Genesis, is this idea of a covenant between God and Abram. God strikes a deal. It's a funny thing to think about, for me—God making deals. But, in fact, it is the core of the Old Testament and the foundation of the New—we have a deal with God. God's piece of the deal is this: God agrees to be our God, present with us, guiding and protecting us, giving us the land for our use and all other good things. Giving us the ability to be co-creators, participating in creation as farmers, as artists, as artisans, as parents, as business people, as care-givers, as teachers, as ministers. That is God's part of the deal—not insubstantial. Our part of the deal is very simple: we recognize God as God, and enact our lives according to God's wishes. This is the economy of God—the recognition that all we have is God's, that God has given it all to us, and our only part of the deal is to remember that this is so—that what we have has been given to us and that the best of all possible worlds includes our making sure that what has been given is shared with mercy and justice.

You may or may not have been paying attention on the day your English teacher or college professor talked about how story works. He or she probably did a supremely thorough, and possibly boring, job of telling you that story is always aimed at transformation. A story is not a story until one of the characters is changed forever—irreparably altered, for good or for bad, in ways he or she did not expect. Take, for example, the story of Jean Valjean, from Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. Now, you may or may not have

seen the stage play, or the movie, but neither of them do a very good job with the part of the story which really matters, which is Jean Valjean's transformation. It happens early in the book—little more than a quarter of the way into the tale. Jean Valjean was a poor man in 19th century France, who is caught stealing a loaf of bread to feed his starving sister and her family. He is sent to prison for five years for this crime, and when he encounters both slave-labor and violence there, Valjean tries to escape—he attempts escape three times, each time being caught and sentenced to five more years. Finally, he is released, having served a 19 year sentence for stealing a loaf of bread.

When he is released, Valjean finds very quickly that he has no hope of a future. No one will hire him with his yellow pass, which identifies him as an ex-con. He cannot get work or lodging, and has no money for food. Finally, he lands on the door-step of the Bishop of a small village. The Bishop welcomes him in to his home, and, over the protests of his house-keeper, invites Valjean to eat supper with him, insisting that the house-keeper bring out the best silver plates and cups for them to eat on. Again, over his house-keeper's protests, the Bishop invites Valjean to spend the night in his guest room, complete with clean sheets and a warm blanket. During the night, Valjean is restless, not having been used to a bed, or warmth, or comfort, for more than half of his life. He gets up, and finds a bag. He goes through the house, filling the bag with the silver plates and cups on which the Bishop shared dinner with him. He goes to the bedroom of the Bishop, intending to kill him. He finds the Bishop in a peaceful sleep, and, not really knowing why, he leaves him alive, and steals out of the house. Valjean's luck holds true to his history, and he is caught immediately by the gendarmes who bring him back to the house of the Bishop. And then, as they say, a miracle occurs. The Bishop says, "Welcome back, dear friend!" and tells the gendarmes that the items in Valjean's bag were a gift. "But," he says, "you left the best ones behind!" holding out the silver candlesticks from the mantle, worth a fortune to a man like Valjean. When the gendarmes leave, Valjean falls at the feet of the Bishop in tears of relief and gratitude. "My son," says the Bishop, "this night I have purchased your soul for God."

And after that moment, Valjean is never the same. He changes his name. He starts a business, and becomes successful, offering employment in his new town. He becomes mayor of the town—a respectable, generous man. The rest of the story is an adventure around vengeance and love, but that moment of transformation is the essence of that tale. The story of Abram is the same—the transformation of Abram and Sarai comes early—almost at the beginning of the tale. There is the visitation from God, with the call to travel to a distant land and to prepare to create a world-wide dynasty of believers. There is the visitation by the three men, who turn out to be angels. Abram shows them the hospitality required of his culture—the best food, the best wine, water to wash their feet—and they deliver the news that Sarai is going to have a child. Everything changes: Abram becomes Abraham, and Sarai becomes Sarah; Abraham and the men of his house are circumcised, their bodies altered forever; Sarah has a baby, long past her child-bearing years, changing her body (one might say "destroying" her body if one had ever experienced pregnancy and childbirth) forever. They are, each of them, transformed, into something more than they were before, something more than they could possibly have been before.

The economy of God always works in just this way: out of an over-privileged prince, turned murderer, God makes Moses, the leader of his people; out of a puny coward, God makes Gideon, the leader of a triumphant 300; out of a prostitute in an enemy city, God makes Rahab, the rescuer of Joshua, mother

of Boaz, ancestor of Jesus; out of a girl in exile, God makes Esther, the queen who saves her people; out of a fisherman with impulse control issues, God makes Peter, the foundation of the church; out of an obsessive/compulsive Pharisee, God makes Paul, who opens the message of the good news of Jesus the Christ to the entirety of Western culture. And, side-by-side with the message that God is the God of transformation, making miracles out of some pretty sketchy material, is another message to each of us, as recipients of that grace: who are we to judge who should receive the grace of God? Who are we to judge who is in, and who is out? Who are we to judge who is right and who is wrong? Side-by-side with the message of God's inclusive love of each of us is the message that we are not equipped to exclude anyone from God's inclusion of each of us.

This theme of biblical hospitality, this economy of God, begins with God as host. From there, it instructs us that hospitality is our part of the deal with God. Just as God has given us land, and protected us, brought us out of our oppression, so we are to do the same for any outsiders in our midst. Christine Pohl, in her book *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, says this about the story of Abraham welcoming the three guests:

This first formative story of the biblical tradition on hospitality is unambiguously positive about welcoming strangers. It connects hospitality with the presence of God, with promise, and with blessing.

Christine Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*.

Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999, p. 24

She says,

The covenantal structure of their faith framed Israelite responses to the alien. Just as God "executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner," so Israel was to act with justice that could not be bought and with love that welcomed and provided. As God's love for aliens provided them with food and clothing, so Israel was to express its love in practical, active ways. Specific laws required that Israel avoid mistreating and oppressing sojourners but instead actively seek their well-being.
Pohl, p. 28-29

A few weeks ago, I heard a conversation on the radio between an interviewer and two men: one, a man named Derek Black, a former white nationalist, and the other Matthew Stephenson, a Jewish man who befriended Derek Black. Derek's father is a white supremacist, a person so deeply entrenched in that movement that he founded the most powerful white power website on the internet. Derek's entire childhood centered around the tenets of hate taught to him by his father. When he grew up, he was the "heir apparent," taking leadership roles in white supremacist organizations even before he went to college. At college, however, he ran into some people from different backgrounds—specifically, he ran into two Jewish young men, one of whom was Matthew Stephenson. Matthew tells about how ostracized and isolated Derek was—everyone knew who he was and he spent most of his time alone in his room, playing bad country and western on his guitar. Matthew was, at the time, hosting weekly Shabbat meals in his room. He and his friend, Moshe, decided to invite Derek. Matthew says,
... it's easy to gloss over the fact that between the time Derek was first invited to one of these Shabbat dinners and the time that, really, I had any real awareness that his views on white nationalism had changed, was about two years apart. That's two years of every

week, coming over, spending hours; receiving, frankly, a lot of criticism by other people on the campus — not everybody, but certain people on the campus, for what I was doing, including friends who had been coming to these dinners previously and stopped coming because they didn't want to be around Derek.

Krista Tippet, "How Friendship and Quiet Conversation Transformed a White Nationalist," *On Being*, May 2018.

Over the course of those two years, eating weekly meals together, Matthew and Moshe and the others who join them extend hospitality, over and over again, to someone who has openly expressed hatred toward them, simply because of who they are and what they believe. And Derek is transformed. He renounced white supremacy, and now is part of an ongoing conversation in the culture about how we invite each other in, how we listen to each other, how we can find common ground.

So what does this mean for us? How do we prepare for hospitality? How do we live according to guidelines which require our hospitality? It doesn't make sense for us to give all we have away—then we are destitute, and someone must care for us. Anyway, we're not doing that—it is pointless even to talk about it. Are we supposed to bring homeless people into our houses? That doesn't seem safe. And anyway, we're not doing that—it is pointless even to talk about it. I would propose this: that instead of listing specific things we think we should do, we work to change the mindset of our personal economy. Instead of allowing ourselves to be ruled by the American mythology that possessions are earned, that we deserve the things we get, we embrace the economy of God—that everything we have is a gift, meant to be shared so that every person is able to experience the generosity of God. And I'll tell you something about the economy of God—it is very freeing. In an economy where I deserve what I have, I must spend an inordinate amount of time protecting what I have. In the economy of God, my table is not mine, so instead of sealing it off, I might ask, "Who can I share my dinner with?" In the economy of God, my car is not mine, so instead of hiding it in the garage, I might think, "How can this car be of help to others?" In the economy of God, I never have to worry about thieves in my home, or who might be taking advantage of me—it was never mine anyway and my great joy is in my ability to share what I have broadly. Why would I worry about that?

I like to imagine the moment Abraham and Sarah might have shared when Isaac is born. I do not think there were any words. They had been through so much—a harrowing, and often dangerous journey; an angry and unhappy attempt at parenthood through their servant, Hagar; taking on a new identity; pregnancy! And then, this moment of fulfillment—all they could have every dreamed, and much, much more. This beautiful child, their child, who would be the start of a people whose number was more than the stars. I can imagine them, leaning against a pillow, huddled around this small, fragile, beautiful life, wondering at this miracle, laughing at the absurdity of it all, and lifting his tiny head to their noses to take in the reality of his scent, to kiss his delicate curls, and to collapse in gratitude for the gift they never thought they would have. That is the economy of God—the desire of God, for each and every human life. And when we embrace it, we become transformed—new people, generous, unafraid, secure, optimistic people. We become free to give, free to receive, free to accept, free to experience all that God who has us experience as the beloved children of the one to whom it all belongs.