

Text: Genesis 15: 1-11, 15-17
Title: First Fruits and Shining Stars
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What's essential to being Reformed?

As a cultural and theological tradition what's our defining mark? What gift, theme, or emphasis do we offer to the world and the broader church? What are our first fruits?

Those questions are being asked by the Saint Croix Reformed Church in the Virgin Islands. In 1740 Dutch cane-farmers and slave-traders trafficked in sugar and West Africans, and they planted a Reformed Church. In the mid-1800s that church closed, the building was sold to the Lutherans, and an institutional Reformed presence disappeared from the island.

But then, in the 1990s, by some stirring of the Spirit, the Saint Croix Reformed Church was re-booted and re-formed. They built a new building atop a verdant hill and they began to gather a congregation of "snowbirds" and Crucians (what they call natives to the island).

Therefore, on an island that's 75% black, mostly West African diaspora, the church began to wrestle with its history. When they gathered for communion should they use the historical communion chalice etched with the names of slave-owners and slave-traders? What are the dynamics of race, power, and repentance when building a new church culture? What's essential to being Reformed? What first fruits do they have to offer?

Dear friends, what we recite, remember, and rehearse in symbol and story is what forms a community. And for Reformed folks this text in Genesis is one of those essential formative stories – wherever they gather.

Consider...

God promised Abram and Sarai – two dry old nomads – that they would have land and children. But decades passed....

they survived famines,
they took refuge in Egypt,
they amassed great wealth,
they waged war,
they grew older,
and there was still no sign of a child.

God's promise stood in sharp contrast to their barrenness.

Eventually, Abram thought it such foolishness that he took matters into his own hands and drew up a will to pass on his possessions to a favored servant, Eliezer. It's worth noting here that Eliezer is not named as the son of a father – the typical designation – but as the child of Abram's property. Literally, "a son of my house."

That said, whatever God had promised didn't reflect the reality that Abram knew, therefore God drags Abram outside to look up at the stars and invites him to start counting.

This was not the flickering of a few stars against the ambient light of the city. This was the pitch-black-darkness of the desert-sky spangled with millions and billions of stars and the clouds of faraway galaxies. This was quasars, nebula, and a cosmos that's birthing new stars while expanding outward at an ever-increasing speed....

And God doubles down. To one without a son, God says, "So shall your offspring be. Not only will you have a child, but you will be father of more than can be numbered...." God makes an intangible promise vivid, graphic, and intergalactic.

One way to read the Bible is as the unfolding story of the covenants that God makes with humanity. Our text is one link in the chain of covenants that runs throughout scripture.

And this is one theme or first fruit that Reformed folks offer. What distinguishes a Reformed reading of scripture is an emphasis on the covenant-making activity of God. Let me suggest two qualities or implications of those covenants.

Anne Lamott was a writer, alcoholic, single mom, and a wreck – with a nagging sense that despite how hard she ran God was tracking her down. She thought of God as an ally cat who wouldn't leave her alone. Listen to this description:

I thought it was just an apparition, born of fear and self-loathing and booze and loss of blood. But then everywhere I went, I had the feeling that a little cat was following me, wanting me to reach down and pick it up, wanting me to open the door and let it in. But I knew what would happen: you let a cat in one time, give it a little milk, and then it stays forever. So I tried to keep one step ahead of it, slamming my houseboat door when I entered or left.

Later, when life was ruptured and chaotic, she walked out of a church service...

I began to cry and left before the benediction, and I raced home and felt the little cat running at my heels, and I walked down the dock past dozens of potted flowers, under a sky as blue as one of God's own dreams, and I opened the door to my houseboat, and I stood there a minute, and then I hung my head and said 'F— it: I quit.' I took a long deep breath and said out loud, 'All right. You can come in.' So this was my beautiful moment of conversion."

God pursues us.

From that first moment when God goes looking for Adam and Eve, to picking out Abram and making promises, to entering into creation in Christ, to steadily padding after each of us like an alley cat, God pursues us.

Abram doesn't go looking for God. There is no indication that Abram was a seeker who forged a relationship with God because of his discipline and dogged determination. Rather, the story reads that when Abram was 75 God came to him and said,

Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and bless you.... And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

The initiative is God's.
The pursuit is God's.
The promise is God's.
Thanks be to God.

The second implication is this: As Abram peers up into the night sky and counts the stars there's this line:

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

Now. You have to wonder what changed?

Was Abram impressed by the starry-starry night? Was he persuaded that if God could make the stars shine, he could surely kindle life in an old womb? Was there something in the tone of God's voice? Was he convinced and convicted by God's confidence? All we're left with is Abram looking up and believing. What changed Abram's mind? What sparked faith in Abram's heart?

Walter Brueggemann gets at it this way:

What moved Abraham to a new response? Surely it was not because he feels new generative powers in his loins. Nor because he has new expectations for Sarah. The new promise for his life is not any expectation of flesh and blood. Rather, he has come to rely on the promise speaker. He has now permitted God to be not a hypothesis about the future, but the voice around which his life is organized.... The new pilgrimage of Abraham is not grounded in the old flesh of Sarah nor the tired bones of Abraham, but in the disclosing word of God.

All throughout scripture God pursues us and makes promises with us. What he wants in response is relationship. He wants to be the voice around which life is organized. And Abram's response gets credited as "righteousness" by God. Belief squares things up. All that God counts here is trust – trust that God will keep his promise.

Seems simple enough. And yet, truth be told, throughout the rest of scripture, the people on the other end of the covenant fail to live up to their end of the deal. Over and over again they fall away and forget,
they slip up and screw up,
they deny and doubt,
they waffle and walk away,

they behave just like me and you.
And still, relentlessly and repeatedly, even unto death, God pursues them to renew the covenant.

Dear friends, the first fruits that reformed folks bring is an emphasis on God's covenant-making activity – the deep gratitude that we belong to God....

The shadow of that emphasis is when we think the promises are exclusively ours. The spoilage of those first fruits has been apartheid in South Africa, slavery in the Virgin Islands and the Americas, and our own disappointing and damning history with race. We've held the promises and been slow to recognize, celebrate, or participate in those promises with others.

As one pastor puts it:

Covenant, it turns out, is not an agreement between human beings after all, but a relationship initiated by God and sealed in baptism. In covenanting with human beings, God reaches out to them and says: "You are mine." It is God's covenant that forms the basis of the church. Yes, those of us within the church will at some point find ourselves in disagreement. But our disagreements do not give us the right to suggest that one of us should leave the covenant – because it is God's covenant, not ours. Nor do our disagreements give me the right to suggest that you should move to a table "further down" – because it is not my table you are invited to, but God's table.

The first fruits that we rehearse, remember, and offer to others is not our faithfulness but the faithfulness of God. The theological gift or emphasis that we share is the good news that without precondition God seeks after us, promising to be our God and we his people....

Truth be told, we're the shining stars of God's promise to Abram.

May our lives be ordered in response to those promises.

May we come to the table as a sign and seal that those promises are fully realized in Jesus Christ.

And may we share these first fruits with others – for the promises are not ours alone but belong to as many stars as fill sky.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.