

Covenant of Land

The Lord said to Abram, "Leave your land, your family, and your father's household for the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation and will bless you. I will make your name respected, and you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you,
those who curse you I will curse;
all the families of the earth
will be blessed because of you."

Abram left just as the Lord told him, and Lot went with him.

Gen. 12:1-4a (C.E.B.)

"The Lord said to Abram, "Leave your land, your family, and your father's household for the land that I will show you" (Gen. 12:1). Hmph.

I know for many people it would be scary to leave a familiar place and move to someplace foreign. For me, it was how I grew up. For most of my life, in fact, it was the spiritual image of a journey that gave me comfort and guidance. I left familiar places so often that I used to tell people "home is where my suitcase is." Before graduating from high school, in fact, I attended schools in six different states – east, west, north and south.

It's probably why almost every time I encounter this text, I feel myself connected to Abram. And I know I'm not alone with that feeling.

It's part of the ethos of our American culture. We are a nation of immigrants, after all. Settlers came in waves from places across the globe. The first wave of Europeans came and settled along the coast. Over time, they followed a journey towards the west. Some going as far as what is now, Ohio; some as far as the Mississippi River. Still more set their sights on the Pacific coast, while others stopped in places like Kansas, a place I have called home longer than any other place.

Some came in later migrations. My own ancestors came from Germany and Ireland in the late 19th century. Other people came from Ukraine; still others arrived from Japan, India, and Vietnam. Each wave of immigrants brought their own story of a journey, not unlike the journey that Abram began long, long ago.

But maybe that's part of his upbringing, too. It's always been curious to me that his own father was a migrant. Did you remember that?

In the passage immediately preceding our text for today, we learn that Terah "left Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan;" then it says, "arriving at Haran, settled there" (Gen. 11:31).

I have no hard evidence for it, but I've always wondered if God originally called Terah to leave his land for the land of Canaan, only to become weary of the journey. Was he called to go further, but stopped when he came to Haran? If that were so, it would make the argument about Abram's faith even more profound, since he did what his own father could not do (Heb. 11:8).

I've moved often enough to understand why someone might not want to move again. When we moved to El Dorado a year and half ago, we said it was going to be our last move. It was the 58th time I've moved. I don't know how often Terah moved before arriving in Haran, but I understand why someone would choose to stop and never move again.

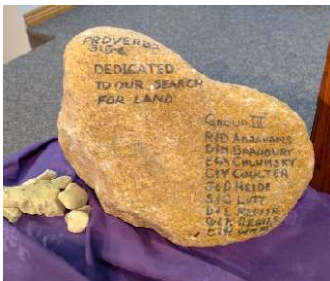
As I've said, I really connect with the image of the journey. But this text isn't just about the journey, is it? It's about the Covenant of Land, a covenant in which God promises a place for Abram and his heirs, a covenant in which Abram reciprocates by stepping out in faith. The land itself is at the heart of this passage.

*Moving from behind the pulpit to the altar, I
the stones set there.*



will pick up one of

I love the way we have gifted members who help us worship by presenting visual images for us. Leslie James made a rock to help us connect with our theme of covenants during Lent. We'll talk about that rock in a later sermon. Today, I want to highlight this one. It lists the names of the people on the committee that sought out and found the property for Hope Mennonite Church to build. Some of these people are here with us today. I don't know the last time they were thanked, but I'm grateful.



And while I'm glad we found this land, and I'm sure you are too, and I'm thankful for those who worked to create this space for us – from those who envisioned it to those who built it, to those who have maintained it over the course of the past 40 years. I'm thankful. I'm also aware that this land once belonged to someone else. It's a truth we don't often stop to acknowledge.

This land is the where the Osage and Kiowa peoples lived; some still live in the area. I believe it is important for us to learn how to live with that knowledge, recognizing the pain of their loss as well as the gratitude for what we have. It isn't easy to live in that tension; and as a consequence, many people choose to ignore the truth.

Others choose to begin every gathering with a Land Acknowledgement: "We gratefully acknowledge the Native Peoples on whose ancestral homelands we gather, as well as the diverse and vibrant Native communities who make their home here today." I wonder what it would be like to begin every worship service with that acknowledgement?

The problem, as I see it, is there are at least two different understandings of what it means to be given – or even to possess – land. In one understanding, the land does not belong to anyone, but is given for all people. We simply become the caretakers, or stewards of the land. In the other understanding, the land belongs to the government and can be sold to private citizens – and can be claimed back by the government, using the law of eminent domain.

Depending on which way you understand the land, you hear the Acknowledgement of Land differently. You also hear the Covenant of Land with a different sets of ears. Is it God's land given for our use but remains God's land? Or does God give us the right of ownership with permission to do whatever we want with it? How lightly will Abram tread on the land he is given?

It is curious to note that Abram never really fully acquires the land.¹ When Sarah dies, in fact, he has to purchase a plot to bury her (Gen. 23:4). He doesn't even own enough land to find a burial place. The land, as much as it was his to possess, was a gift his for descendants to inherit.

¹ Craddock, p. 156

A Native American proverb says, “Treat the earth well: it was not given to you by your parents, it was loaned to you by your children.”² Another one says, “We do not inherit the Earth from our Ancestors, we borrow it from our Children.”²

Of course, that can be heard differently depending on your understanding of land ownership, too. I hear it from the perspective of stewardship. It’s all God’s land.

Several years ago, I was reminded of the history of how we use the word steward and stewardship. It can be traced to the translators of the King James Bible. A team of scholars was commissioned by King James to translate the Bible into common English. They chose the word steward based on their understanding of what a steward was in that era of time.

For the most part, land was owned by a Lord. He – and it was almost always a man – lived in a castle, or at least a very large estate. The serfs and servants worked almost like slaves, feeding the Lord by growing crops and livestock on their master’s land. The Lord typically hired a steward to manage the estate.

The Steward usually lived away from the castle, in the second largest home on the estate. From there he provided oversight to the workers. The Steward never owned the land, he simply took care of it for the Lord, for the landowner.

When I learned of those dynamics, I suddenly realized we are all Stewards of the Land, that the Covenant of Land was not just for Abram, but for all people; and I began to understand the land I own was never, and will never, be mine. It is on loan. Not from my children, as the Native Americans might say, but from God. I have temporary responsibility for the land, to “care for it” as Adam was directed to do in our text from last week (Gen. 2:15).

So, how have I done with caring for the land? How have *we* done?

You don’t have to look very hard in the news to know we have not always been good Stewards. We have not always taken care of the land or the water or the air. And that nonchalance has had consequences beyond the boundaries of our property lines. There are some who will tell you that our lack of care for the land is at the root of the measurable global warming. (And just to be clear, I agree with them; I also recognize some people want to attribute global warming to cycles of nature. I don’t want to engage in that discussion today. I simply raise it to remind us there may be a connection between how we view land and how our climate is affected.)

I do believe we can make changes in the way we live that will help protect this gift we have received, this gift of land, changes that will benefit not only us, but our descendants as well as our neighbors.

One change we can make is to reconsider our understanding of land. Is it ours? Or does it belong to God? Are we Stewards? Or are we the legitimate owners? How we answer those questions will affect what we do.

In doing research for this sermon, I came across a challenge I’d not heard of before. Maybe some of you know about the Zero Waste Challenge.³ The challenge is to go a week, or maybe a month, using only one mason jar for all of your trash. Everything else is to be reused or recycled.

² I could not find a source for these; I found them in an online search.

³ <https://reepgreen.ca/zwc/>

Reading the testimonies of those who have tried it is inspiring. Most found it difficult at first, but with enough changes in their lifestyle, they were able to achieve the goal. Here is one report I found in the Anabaptist Climate Collaborative:⁴

During lent last year, Noa Baergen replaced their trash can with a mason jar. Fitting six weeks of garbage into a container the size of a water bottle challenged the university student to rethink their relationship with waste. "It changed how I think about waste (because) it forced me to understand that garbage is permanent and that it does accumulate and it does have real effects," Noa said, "Having to keep the garbage I created in a container where I could see it really made that stand out to me."

I'm not sure I could go that far – but maybe I should try. Taking dramatic actions like Noa took invite us to look again at our daily habits, seeking ways to change the way we interact with the land, the land we have inherited as a gift.

Maybe you want to try a different approach. Maybe you want to learn how to live with less water in an effort to save the Ogallala Aquifer. After seeing images of the receding shoreline of the Great Salt Lake and water levels at Hoover Dam, I don't want that to be a story that is repeated in the underground water source we draw from here. If we each reduced our water consumption a little bit, we would make a difference.

We have received the Covenant of the Land. God has continued to be faithful to the covenant. I think it's time we repent of our failures and recommit to our part of the covenant.

I guess I'm inviting you to join me on a journey, a different kind of journey than the one Abram took. This one is a metaphorical journey into a world where we begin to take more responsibility for the well-being of the land, the water, and the air. To begin that journey requires no less faith than that of Abram. It only means we need to take the first step.

Start by asking whose land it is.
Start by asking what a good steward of that land would do.
Start by finding one thing you can change in your life.
And then step out in faith, just like Abram did.

Together, we can change the world.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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⁴ February 22's suggestion at <https://sustainableclimatesolutions.org/climate-pollinator-series/>

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