

Hard Choices in the Wilderness
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
January 23, 2022-PM Service
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Genesis 13:1-18

As a former youth group leader I have played a lot of spoons. In the youth leader world, you run a lot of evening meetings and you organize retreats and one of the go to games at these events was spoons. At least it was for me. For those of you who do not know this card game, let me fill you in. We play it at youth group sometimes. For our youth group spoons games we all sit in a big circle – imagine 15 of us sitting there - and in the middle of the circle we put only 14 spoons. 15 people, 14 spoons. During the game we pass cards around the circle until one person gets four cards in their hand that are all the same number. As soon as someone gets the same four cards, that person grabs one of the spoons from the middle of the circle, and at that point chaos ensues. Once one of the spoons has been grabbed, the rest of the 14 remaining players have to get one of the 13 remaining spoons as fast as they can! The person who doesn't get a spoon loses. They are out of the game. What you usually get at that point is a wild scrum of humanity, all of them fighting to get a hold of a spoon. There is pushing. There is grabbing. I have seen sweet-tempered children - polite young men, sweet kind young girls - become wild animals in that moment. I have seen the veil of civilization torn asunder as these covenant children fight each other for the last spoon.

Why am I talking about spoons? Because spoons is a picture, a kind of case study, of how people behave in a time of scarcity. A time when resources are thin and there isn't enough for everyone. And that's our passage. Abram is living in a time of scarcity. It's not because he's poor. Just the opposite. Abram is a wealthy man. His barns are full of cattle and his fields are full of sheep. And that's part of the problem, because his nephew Lot's empire is expanding too. Their farms have become so large that there simply isn't enough real estate for both of them. There's a land crisis. Not enough grazing space for everyone's cattle. You might say: there aren't enough spoons for everyone.

This scarcity has pushed Abram and Lot to the top of a hill overlooking the land of Canaan. The land rolls away before them on every side. Lot is scanning the horizon, shielding his eyes and considering his options. To the west the dominant color is brown. The land is mostly dust and rocks. There are occasional patches of green, a few scraggy trees, but mostly it's an expanse of sun baked earth. C- farm land at best. To the east it's a completely different story. Now the dominant color is green. The Jordan River runs blue through emerald fields. Springs feed the land and farms quilt the countryside. This was a place where sheep could feed; this was a place where crops could grow—it was like the garden of Eden. Lot looks over the land, and he looks at Abram. The situation was clear enough: There were two people and only one spoon, so Lot grabbed it. "I think I'll go over there by the river," said Lot, "Well, have a good day! See you around!" And Lot walked away quickly off to the east.

Abram hung his head. The yellow dust swirled at his feet. What was he going to do now! What was he going to tell Sarah? He imagined what she would say when she found out about her new home. "We are going to live where?! In that dusty desert?! And Lot is going to live down there in paradise?! You just let him take the land?! Abram you old fool! Are you going senile?? You'd think he was the uncle and you were the nephew! You're the elder you know! You had right of first choice! Now we have to live in a dust bowl!!!!"

Abram's behavior here is strange isn't it? Abram would be bad at spoons. He doesn't live out of fear and scarcity. Even though he's the older one, even though, by rights, his nephew should defer to him and give him the first choice, Abram defers and lets Lot choose. Lot would be really good at spoons. He does what people do in scarcity. Lot grabs. Survival is on the line. His success is at stake. He elbows custom and generosity aside, and he grabs the good land in the east. Abram's behavior is rooted in two things: It's rooted in generosity. He is willing to sacrifice part of himself for the sake of his nephew. Even though it will cost him. It's also rooted in obedience. The land he ends up in is closer to the place where the Lord led him in the first place. When he first came to this place he built an altar at Shechem and worshipped there. The land where he will now settle is closer to the place where the Lord had led him. Lot's country was greener but was further from the place of promise. In accepting the harsher country, Abram is trusting the promises of God. He is trusting God to do what he said. He's not living out of the scarcity of the moment; he's living out of the abundance of the covenant.

That's not something Abram always did. Just one chapter ago, Abram faced a different time of scarcity, and this time he was a grabber. There was a famine in the land, but instead of staying in the land of promise, Abram grabbed the first train to Egypt and the green pastures of the Nile. When powerful Egyptian men had their eye on his wife, Abram grabbed a lie: "She is my sister!" Times were hard and food was scarce, but instead of doing what he knew was right, instead of living God's way, instead of living by God's promises, instead of trusting God, Abram bailed on the promised land and started grabbing. It ended badly. Pharaoh—Pharaoh of all people—ended up giving him a lecture about honesty and faithfulness. This time it's like he is determined to do better. He will live according to the promise. He will not be defined by the pressures, the demands, the temptations of the moment. He will live by the promise.

That's not an easy thing to do. Sometimes living out of the promises, living generously, leaves you standing on a dusty hillside with no spoon in your hand. It's always hard to do the right thing in a time of scarcity and trouble. Your marriage is difficult. It's not a walk through the park; it's a slog through the mud. It wears you down. And all around you people with similar problems to yours are bailing. All around you people are telling you to do whatever makes you happy, to follow your bliss. All around you people are moving to greener pastures. They're grabbing for a new spoon. But you stick it out because you know that that's what you're called to do. Or you've just had the amniocentesis done and it looks like your baby will have problems, significant problems. It looks like this baby will need a lifetime of care and extra attention. And all around you people are telling you that there's an easy way out. All around you there are voices pointing you toward the quick solution. But you, fearfully and tearfully, go ahead with the baby. You've never been so nervous about the future of the economy. All around you are people who are prophesying doom! Doom! Doom! Our country is headed towards disaster, scarcity is coming! It freaks you out. But at the same time, your mailbox keeps filling up with requests for help. Desperate requests from ministries and relief services, all of them opening with a line some version of, "Dear friend! The need has never been greater!" All around you see people pulling in their resources, but you keep taking out your checkbook and writing the checks, although even as you do it, you look down at your feet and wonder if you might be absolutely crazy. There are all sorts of places where living by God's promises is really hard, where it looks foolish. There are all sorts of places in life where we find ourselves standing on the hill with Abram, watching Lot walk away while the dust swirls around us.

God does not let us stand alone on that hill. Abram is standing there with his head down after giving the good land to Lot, feeling foolish and a little scared, and God comes and ministers

to him. God shows him the green pasture of his promises. “Abram, Raise your eyes now! Lift up your head! Don’t let your face be downcast. It will be okay. Lift up your head! Look at all the land around you. All this I will give to you and your offspring forever!” I know that standing here in the dust, things look bad, but view the present through the promise. This will be yours.

And God does more than encourage Abram, later God’s own Son faces the same kind of choice Abram faced. Remember Chad’s sermon of last week? Very early in his ministry, also in a time of scarcity, when he’s in the wilderness, the Devil comes to Jesus. The devil comes to Jesus and tries to get him to grab the easy path, to put his own present needs ahead of the promise. The devil takes Jesus to a high mountain and shows him a green pasture. “All the kingdoms of the world can be yours if you just bow down and worship me!” On that high hill, Jesus has two choices. In one direction is a hard landscape. The way of the cross. There is pain in that choice, but also a victory. At the end of that road all authority on heaven and earth will belong to him. The road the devil offers seems quick and easy. “Just a little disobedience and all this can be yours.” But the devil’s way is not the way of the promise, and Jesus chooses the way of the promise. Doesn’t that sound a little like Abram in Genesis 13? Jesus lives by the promise, not by his hunger. Not by his scarcity.

We call ourselves covenant children. We call ourselves children of the promise. It’s a nice to know those promises are there, but I think the real challenge is to let that covenant really govern the way we react to things in this world. We are *really* children of the promise when we become the kind of people who, when the crisis hits, instinctively act out of the open hand of the promise instead of the fearful grab of scarcity.

I remember 30-some years ago when the movie *The Last Temptation of Christ* came out. Do you remember that movie? It was controversial. Jesus was portrayed as very, very human in that movie. He was portrayed as a hesitating, uncertain fellow. The movie had scene after scene of him wringing his hands, wondering if he was doing the right thing, wondering if he might not be getting it all wrong. I remember reading a review of the movie by a Jewish man who criticized the movie based on his own experience with strong Christians. “I don’t like this indecisive picture of Jesus,” he wrote. “My parents were protected by Christians during the war. They showed up at the house of their Christian neighbors and their neighbors said, without hesitation, without any hand wringing, ‘come in. We will help you. We will hide you.’ It was their instinct to live out of hope and generosity.” This was a time of terrible scarcity. This choice could have cost this Christian couple their lives. But these people lived out of the promise. They lived out of that deep strength that transcends the pressures of today. They were in the deepest sense possible, children of the covenant. I know that their story is probably the exception. I know that there were lots of baptized Christians in Europe who turned their back on the Jews in those scarce times. I know that some “Christians” were so afraid during that time of scarcity that they became Nazi sympathizers—they looked after themselves, they grabbed at the spoon. But that family who rescued the Jews radiated the covenant life of Jesus

When you hear a story like that, you can’t help look at your own life and wonder, ‘How would I react in the same situation.’ If you’re like me you probably wonder, ‘is the promise deeply rooted enough in me that I would instinctively respond this way, or would I make an excuse, close the door in the face of the desperate family who showed up at my door?’ The truth is we all go back and forth. We oscillate between covenant generosity and fear; sometimes we grab the spoon; sometimes we open our arms; sometimes we’re like Abram in chapter 12, sometimes we’re like Abram in chapter 13. We’re all works in progress.

So for the times you live out of the promise and make those hard sacrificial choices, I offer you the encouragement that God gave to Abram. Lift up your heads. Do not be afraid. Today may be dry but the river of the promise is always flowing and its pastures are always green. Lift up your eyes and look about you, walk the length and breadth of your life: your life belongs to your faithful Savior Jesus Christ and you are safely in his hands. And for the times when you fail, when you give into the pressure and grab the spoon, I offer you the other man on the hill—Jesus. Because on a day of horrible scarcity, on a day when everyone else grabbed the spoon of self-preservation, on a day when everyone else abandoned him and fled for greener pastures, Jesus lived by the promise, Jesus sealed the covenant in his blood. Because of him our back and forth lives are held secure, because of him our work in progress will progress, because of him the promise stands.

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