

Pinky Swear

Preached FCCW, March 17, 2019

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

Hooking little fingers together in a “pinky swear” is one of the ways we learn while growing up, the importance of respecting a solemn promise. A pinky swear seems like all fun and games...until you know what it stands for; which is that the consequence of breaking the agreement is to lose your pinky finger! Then, suddenly it all sounds pretty barbaric.

But, still not as barbaric as the way Abram sealed a covenant with God by bisecting a bunch of animals. Let’s face it, any ceremony that includes the necessity of shooing vultures away is not for the faint of heart. Maybe though, it is exactly the faintest of heart who most need promises that come with extreme demonstrations of trust.

God had made some hefty promises to Abram. Like, if he would leave his home and family God would give him a new home in a different land. And God would give him and his wife Sarai so many descendants that that you could sooner count the stars in a crystal-clear desert night sky than compute the number of their posterity. As time wore on though, Abram grew desperate about whether God might have forgotten His side of the bargain.

So, Abram doubled down on wanting some reassurances that the deal was still on. He asked God, “O Lord God, how am I to know that the things you promised will come true?” God arranged for a more formalized agreement; one that spelled out more precisely both the terms of the deal and the consequences to either party for reneging.

In the ancient world, this was called “cutting a covenant.” It’s where our expression “cutting a deal” comes from. It was called cutting a covenant because that is exactly what they did. They cut the carcasses of animal sacrifices in half, arranged them on the ground, then walked between the halves. It was a “pinky swear” way of saying, “may this happen to me if I break our agreement.” Of swearing by one’s own life to honor a promise.

God set the terms of the covenant by telling Abram, “I will be your shield; your reward will be very great.” That’s how it reads in our NRSV bibles. But in the NIV bible that verse is translated slightly, although significantly different: “I am your shield; your very great reward.”

God is the reward being promised to Abram. It turns out that this covenant is not mainly concerned with *future* promises of children or land so much as it is a guarantee of a *present* relationship with God. If only Abram could believe in the sanctity of that relationship, he might be better able to believe in the promises God made about his and Sarai’s future.

It is written that Abram believed God, and God reckoned it to him as righteousness. Abram decided to trust God without any guarantee other than God’s own trustworthiness. In return, God pronounced Abram righteous.

Look it up in a dictionary and the definition of righteous will likely contain words like virtuous or devout. But the Hebrew word for “righteousness has nothing at all to do with personal virtue. Instead, it describes a harmonious relationship between two parties. It is the condition of being “set right” with another person. Specifically, of being set right with God.

When Christians speak of salvation, that is what we are talking about. The gift of a harmonious relationship, of being set right, with God without any conditions attached, other than the condition of our faith in the promise. When Christians speak of grace, that is what we are talking about.

Abram follows God’s instructions for this elaborate pinky swear of animal sacrifices and waits for God to show up for the ceremony. But God is late for the party. Abram falls asleep, possibly exhausted from chasing buzzards away from the scene. That left only God, in the form of fire and smoke, to pass between the sacrifices.

It’s impossible to overestimate the significance of the fact that God is the only one to take the walk of cutting the covenant, while Abram sleeps. To understand the implication of this, imagine yourself taking out a mortgage on a home. The loan officer signs the contract that promises you the money to purchase your home; then turns around and signs the line that designates who is responsible if you fail to make your payments. You get your home and the banker assumes all the risks!

In the same way, Abram received the promise but it was God who took all the risks. There was only one life on the line in this covenant. God's!

If Abram walked the walk of cutting the covenant alongside God, that would've made equal partners between God and humanity. That means that the covenant would have been broken whenever men and women failed to hold up their side of the bargain. Humanity would be perpetually in debt to God. But, because the covenant was essentially between God and Himself, there was no power given to humanity to nullify the promise of being set right with God.

You don't have to look far to see the ways humanity fails to keep our side of the bargain. They are more numerous than the stars in the sky. All we have to do is look honestly at our own lives to see how we fail to keep it ourselves. But it has always been, and will always be, God who is the injured party. God is the one who pays a price for humanity's faithlessness. God staked His own life on the promise made to Abram.

In Jesus' earthy life we see most clearly the depth of God's willingness to suffer for God's people. It will be Jesus who will have to walk through death to maintain our righteousness; our being set right with God. At the cross, God paid the price that He excused any of us, who are Abram's descendants by faith, from having to pay for ourselves.

That sacred covenant made with Abram, which sets us right with God is free for the taking. But that doesn't mean it didn't cost anything. It just didn't cost *us* anything. But it most certainly calls us *to* something. It calls us to lives of believing God's promises as we walk in the ways of the Lord.

Those of us who were able to be here last Sunday when new members were received, read together the words of the church covenant that binds us together on that walk as God's people. That covenant is recorded with ink and paper, not with sacrificed animals. But all of us can trace our sacred journeys back to the covenant made by God to Abram, and then ratified by Jesus.

When life seems full of uncertainty about the future, as it did for Abram; when we wonder, as Abram did, what God is waiting for in some circumstance of our lives; when we need something more solid than promises on which to build our faith; God has given us the cross.

The ultimate assurance we need to live by the covenants we make is God's own life, given on our behalf through Jesus. Like Abram, all that is required of us, is to receive it in faith, and know ourselves to be reckoned as righteous.

After all, God pinky swore it to be that way.

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