

Genesis 15
A Time to Grow: Lent 2
February 25, 2024
Rev. Kelley L. Becker

L'chaim is an expression people in the Jewish tradition use at celebrations. You've probably heard it. Translated into English, the phrase means, "To life!" It's frequently used as a toast and is almost always part of marriage ceremonies. You may remember that in the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, there is a song called L' chaim that is sung at the announcement of an impending wedding.

To life, to life, l'chaim.
L'chaim, l'chaim, to life.
Here's to the father I tried to be!
Here's to my bride to be!
Drink, l'chaim, to life!

To life, to life, l'chaim.
L'chaim, l'chaim, to life.
Life has a way of confusing us,
Blessing and bruising us.
Drink, l'chaim, to life!

Weddings are full of promise, full of good wishes, full of plans and dreams. Of course, this is true of all committed relationships, whether the couple chooses to get married or not. In the Christian tradition, the wedding ceremony marks the official beginning of the marriage in which the couple commits to creating a life together. Admittedly, most couples begin to create that life before they say, "I do," but there is something about making it official that changes things. When I provide pre-marital counseling to couples who have lived together prior to being married, I always ask them what they think will change when they get married. If they say, "Nothing," I ask them to think harder.

Also in pre-marital counseling, I work with the couple to plan the ceremony. Many couples choose to do something in the ceremony as a visual representation of their new life together. One of those rituals is the lighting of a unity candle. Over the years, this ritual has changed. It used to be that there would be two lighted candles, each representing one of the people getting married. After the vows, the couple would use those candles to light a third candle and blow out their individual candles. I hated that for two reasons. First, a person doesn't cease to have their own life when they get married, so blowing out those two individual candles seemed aggressive. Second, if the candles symbolize life, why is there less life after the vows than before? A marriage ought to result in more life, more joy, and more love. These days, when a couple gets married, the two individual candles stay lit after the third is lit. Now, the

ritual reminds us that each person is still a whole person, fully engaged in living their own life, and the couple is creating a beautiful life together. More light, more love, more life!

In our 21st century world, the “more life” created when two people commit to one another comes in the form of things like each person having meaningful work and fulfilling their purpose in the world; it comes in the form of each person supporting the other, helping each other grow into the person they were created to be. It comes in the form of friendships and chosen family and the impact all those relationships have on the world. And sometimes, “more life” comes in the form of having children. In the ancient world, the “more life” expected in marriage was always about having children. Having children was the reason to get married. People didn’t live very long, and infant mortality was high, so for a group like the Israelites to survive, a lot of children needed to be born.

This brings us to our text and to Abram and Sarai, an aging couple who had no children. In that time and place, that meant Abram would leave no legacy. There is a Jewish proverb that has also been attributed to other traditions and some specific authors that says, “A person dies twice: once when they stop breathing and again the last time their name is spoken.” In a world without social media, without pictures and videos, and without the benefit of the written word, who would talk about Abram, who would say his name if he didn’t produce offspring? When he died, it would be as if he had never been born. There would be no life for which he was responsible that continued when he was gone.

To help us more fully understand this story in Genesis 15, let me give you a little more context. At the end of Genesis 11, Abram and Sarai were introduced. The first thing for us to note is that in a world full of life, a world in which God had said to “be fruitful and multiply,” Sarai was the first woman to be childless (11:30).

God wanted to choose one group of people to become a “priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6) — a nation through which God would bless all the other nations. In a surprise to no one, God chose the most unlikely couple. They were, as they say, “not spring chickens” and childless. He chose Abram and Sarai. God told Abram to leave his country and all of his family and go to the land God would later show him. God said, “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great so that you will be a blessing.” (Genesis 12:1-2)

Now, until this point, the couple had spent their lives in a tribal system, and the dangers of leaving one’s tribe were great. Most historians estimate that in the ancient world, the average human being never ventured more than ten miles from their place of birth. God’s command to Abram and Sarai meant that they would likely never see most of their tribe again. There was no returning if someone was ill, no big family celebrations, and no deathbed goodbyes. It must have been gut-wrenching.

When I reflect on this story, I find myself thinking about the millions of refugees in our world today who are faced with leaving their land and all they have ever known to secure safety for their families. Many will never see any of their extended family again. Many will never know when and how their parents or even their die. I continue to be frustrated by Christians, who presumably have read the Bible, who lack compassion for immigrants and refugees. The Bible is full of their stories and full of examples of how we are to treat them, and yet, many Christians support legislators who write laws that are literally death-dealing to these vulnerable human beings. These are the same legislators who rabidly proclaim their pro-life positions. The disconnect is stunning.

Despite all the risks and all their fears, Abram and Sarai journeyed to the land God showed them. And they waited. And they waited.

Time passed. They went to Egypt. They came back. They waited.

They became prosperous, even wealthy. They waited.

Their nephew Lot separated from them. Lot was captured. Lot was rescued.

And still, they waited. Still, there was no child. And then, finally, God spoke to Abram in a vision. And said, "Good news! Something great is going to happen!"

Perfect, another promise from God!!

Abram's response? A painful confrontation.

Rather than celebrating what God said, Abram cried out in pain for the deepest hurt and unfulfilled hope in his life: He and Sarai were still childless after all those years, after all their faithfulness.

O Lord God, what shall you give me?

For I am still childless!

And the heir of my house,

He is Eliezer of Damascus.

You have given me no seed,

Thus a "son of my house" will inherit from me!

The term "son of my house" means someone who was enslaved — one who doesn't come from the seed of one's body but is part of the household. What Abram wanted was an heir — a "seed." The Hebrew word for seed is "zera" and it means "offspring."

But it means more. It is sperm. It is the continuation of creation! It is LIFE!

Abram looked inside himself, into the deepest hurts and hope of his body — where his "seed" comes from. And in his pain, he accused God and reminded God of the divine promises in Genesis 12:

"YOU HAVE GIVEN ME NO SEED!" If he had been texting God, it would have been in all caps.

You might think God wouldn't put up with being challenged so loudly and firmly. But God responded by renewing the promise of many descendants and even expanded on that promise: "This one shall not inherit from you," God said, "Indeed that which comes

from within you-He shall inherit from you! Gaze up at the heavens and count the stars if you are able. So shall your seed be!" As many descendants as there are stars! The text tells us then that Abram trusted.

And then God did something extraordinary. God repeated the promise of the land, then said, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon and cut them in two." Abram did as he was told. And later, when the sun went down, God, in the form of fire, passed between the animal halves. The ritual was literally the "cutting of a covenant." To make a covenant in the ancient world, animals were cut in half, and then the one(s) making the covenantal commitment walked down the middle between the animals. Note that in the ritual, it was God who passed down the middle. God made the covenant.

God promised Abram and Sarai LIFE. And not to spoil the story, but God delivered. After this covenant with God, the pressure of waiting for a child was too much. Abram had sex with Hagar, a woman who was enslaved in his home. She had his first son, Ishmael. There is a lot about this part of Abram and Sarai's story that forces us to see the ways in which patriarchy messed things up and was not life-giving. Ishmael was sent away as if he was not life. He was. But that story is for another day. In the end, Abram and Sarai, who would become Abraham and Sarah, had a child together. His name was Isaac. And, according to the Genesis narrative, he was the promise kept. Through him, there was life and Abraham had a legacy. Amid this story primarily meant to teach us that God keeps God's promises, there is a lesson about life. God is a god of abundant life. And even something as tiny as sperm or a seed has the capacity to carry on that abundance. Planting seeds is an act of resistance to the death-dealing ways of the world.

This is the time of year in which we can easily see with our own eyes how true this is. Many of us are beginning, like Anna and the children, to plant seeds, even if we are nurturing them inside for a bit. In those seeds, there is the promise of life. We are seeing it in the daffodils that are shooting up from bulbs right now. Soon, we will hear the sounds of baby birds and get to watch as the mama birds teach the babies to fly. Abundant life is all around us, growing and changing, even when we struggle to see it, even when we do things that squelch it.

We live in a world that tries to tell us what abundant life is. It tells us that owning more things, driving a nice car, having the most expensive education, and really, throwing moderation out the window is abundant life. This way of being in the world is the opposite of life-giving. It wants us to believe more, more, more is abundance. Using more fossil fuel is not creating more life. Consuming more food than we need is not creating more life. Using plastic when we could use paper is not creating more life. Excessively drinking alcohol isn't life-giving, and for some of us, drinking alcohol at all is death-dealing. Sometimes, abundant life comes from less and not more. In this story, we see a couple who were forced to realign their vision of abundance to

God's vision. Abraham and Sarah would never see all those descendants, as many as there are stars in the sky. But they did see Isaac. And they saw that he was enough. They saw that life would go on. There would be someone to tell their story, even though their story was very messy and disorder-ridden.

Every day, we are called to wake up committed to life and to the ways of God, which are life-giving. We are called to be life-givers. We are called to plant seeds of tomatoes and squash and wildflowers and, most especially, to plant seeds of hope. And we are called to nurture those seeds into becoming whatever they are supposed to become and that, dear ones, is very often enough. That is abundant living. That is abundant life. That is the way we will be co-creators with the Holy. It is the way to begin to bring true abundance back to a world that is overrun with the fear of scarcity and the consequences of a more, more, more culture. Plant seeds this week and enjoy the waiting and watching and wondering that comes from planting. Next week, we will begin to talk about how to nurture what we plant together. Amen.