

There was a day I sat at a stoplight listening to the news and a thought came to me: *this is going to take a really long time*. When I got home that night, I told my husband to begin buying two of everything at the grocery. We ordered extra shelves for the basement and began filling our freezer. Every dystopian novel I'd ever read was played in my imagination. I felt uncertain. I focused on things I could control like groceries and long runs. Nothing had happened and I knew something was coming.

Then, March 11th, sitting in a meeting, the text messages and voicemails started. This ambiguous thing I had anticipated was happening. Kentucky's Governor had announced churches should close for two weeks.

I don't remember how long it took for me to accept the intensity of the pandemic. In the beginning, there was so much unknown and so many mixed messages. Somehow, though, I knew in my gut that our kids would not finish the school year in person. Easter of 2020 would look different than any other Easter I had known. Creativity, flexibility, and adaptability were going to be key aspects of the future. Deep in the recesses of my heart and brain, my gut told me that everything was changing.

There's a children's christian education curriculum known as Godly Play. It is similar to Catechesis, the curriculum we use here. The primary teaching in both is storytelling. In Godly Play, many of the Biblical stories about Israel are set in the desert. Obviously, this is because the desert is part of the natural landscape. And so, the stories use a desert box, a box full of sand.

The desert box links stories across time and space. Abram walked in the desert; the Israelites wandered in the desert; the people of Israel were exiled across the desert. The desert, itself, is a character in these stories exposing a spiritual reality: the desert and God's redeeming work are intimately connected.

Consider our readings over the last few weeks. Jesus' transfiguration brought us close to the silence of the desert. Jesus' temptation brought us close to the dangers of the desert. This week, we come close to the beauty of the desert, the vast expanse of land and space. In each of these stories, God is present in the desert. The desert invites us to listen, to trust, and to experience God's activity in creation. Life in the desert is not easy; and God is with us.

The LORD makes a seemingly impossible promise to Abram (Abraham); his ancestors would become a great nation on their own land. And despite Sarai's barrenness, despite war and famine, Abram believes the LORD: he gives his whole life to this promise.

Of course, Abram doubted. I imagine he stood in the desert trying to remember why he believed the promise. How many times did he try to count the grains of sand? How many times did he stare at the stars of the sky? How often did he wonder if he could keep God's promise better than God could: taking the land by force, having children with his slaves, marrying other women...? How often did the silence seem empty? How did Abram know that, in the end, God was close to him and he was close to God?

The last two years have been, to me, like a desert. The church has, literally, been empty and felt barren. The isolation of quarantine has disrupted our experience of community. The uncertainty of the pandemic has eroded my sense of confidence to plan for the future. While I trust that God is with us, I am tempted to depend more on human power and control.

And, every time I imagine we have come to the end, I discover that the reprieve is an oasis: there's more desert ahead. The realities of our lives can feel stark: war, suffering, injustice, and oppression. I sit in silence listening for God, seeking God's activity and desire in our lives? How will God keep God's promises? How do I know that God is with us, that the kin_dom of God is near?

As Abram wonders what happens next, God calls for a sacrifice. Abram gathers up all these animals, maybe he brought them with him, maybe that was Abram's intent all along: to make an offering to God. Abram offers these animals, good food in the desert, to God. Then, he waits.

Now, I don't know for certain how Abram felt. The story, though, gives us a few hints. Abram falls asleep in *a deep and terrifying darkness*. He is tired and afraid. He has done all the things: where is God?

When Abram awakes, things are different. The carcasses of the animals are miraculously untouched by the vultures. Perhaps the smell of smoke is in the air. Perhaps it felt like a dream. And Abram knows: God *cut the covenant*.

In ancient days, the one making the covenant would walk the middle, between the animals. This is more than a promise. This covenant is a commitment, a guarantee, the pledge of a great undertaking. By fire and word, God comes close to Abram, strengthening the promise already made. God makes Abram an oasis in the desert, a reprieve from his doubt.

We have this story today because the people of Israel told this story. Perhaps when they wandered in the desert, they remembered Abram. Perhaps, as they were driven into exile, they remembered Abram. I wonder what this story meant to them. I wonder what it means for us.

As we stand at the two year anniversary of the pandemic, what are the stories that shape us? A lot has happened, keeps happening. We are more aware than ever of all that divides us. The suffering of our world is palpable. We stand in the desert and wait: where is God?

Throughout the pandemic, I have found grief and joy woven together. I have mourned the loss of the Eucharist, searching for God in other ways. I have celebrated the return to in-person worship while remembering those in ongoing isolation. I have grieved our ongoing political, racial, and economic divisions. I have rejoiced as we've come together to serve and minister with our community.

There have been moments of exhaustion and fear,
renewal and hope.

Abram seeks answers, certainty, security. And, in many ways, he is short sighted, only able to see what he can imagine. Meanwhile God shows up amidst exhaustion and fear. And, at the end of it all, God's promise still stands: God is with Abram, very close to him, even in his sleep. More than that, God is in it, this relationship with Abram, for the long run. God's intent, desires for Abram, are more than Abram can imagine.

My faith is marked by the reality of doubt. I am easily distracted by the noise and chaos of life. I am tempted to use my power to gain certainty. I depend on what I see and know to understand God's presence in my life and our world. I am shortsighted, my imagination limited by my humanity.

The story of Abram reminds us that God is always God and we never are. Our vision is limited to this life, this moment, our place in the desert. We wonder what will happen next and what we can do. Meanwhile, God calls us to make a sacrifice, an offering in the desert. Perhaps this means laying down our fears or doubts. Maybe this means shedding some of what we brought into the desert. Our offering could be divisions that exist among us: our political affiliations, our prejudices, our privilege. In the midst of these offerings, God comes close to us. God invites us to trust what we cannot see, to believe promises yet unrealized.

For, you see, God is with us, in every desert, drawing us closer to our redemption. God is God and we are not. Thanks be to God!