

Community Church of Issaquah

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Prayerfully Bargaining with God

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Have you ever wondered how ministers decide on a sermon topic? Actually, there are several ways. We could rely on what's called the lectionary which is a pre-set list of scriptures and sermon topics. Or we could be awestruck while reading a scripture passage and decide to speak on that verse or verses. Or we could be motivated or intrigued by some event or comment made to us that prompts our brains to zero in on something we've read or found in the scriptures. Today's message follows that third option.

In a conversation with one of my sisters, we were discussing our brother-in-law's diagnosis with a brain tumor. Sadly, his prognosis isn't very good. In that dialogue though, I was told that my youngest sister, the wife, had told her family that if God would just make her husband well, she would promise to be the kindest person in the world. First, she is already one of life's kindest people, but second, it was a reminder of how we sometimes want to bargain with God to change the outcome of some situation in life. My sister is a very religious woman, and her comment wasn't just in passing. She meant it.

You wouldn't think that something that happened more than 4000 years ago would have any relevance to our lives today, would you? Or even something someone said 2000

years ago. It doesn't seem logical, especially since neither of these people spoke English! But here we are in 2023 making a connection between Abraham and Jesus and trying to make sense of their views of prayer. There's a common thread there, and it's worth talking about. First, Abraham.

There he was way back in 2066 BC, the man God chose to build a nation upon, hanging out in the Jordan Valley not far from the Dead Sea. Not far from Abraham – or can I use his Hebrew name, Abram – were five cities in the southern end of the Dead Sea in the area of Canaan. Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboim and Zora (also known as Beta). These five cities were each ruled by their own king, but they weren't autonomous. The whole area was a part of the Kingdom of the Elamites, ruled by a pretty mean king.

When the five kings decided they had had enough after about 19 years of dealing with the Elamites, they began a rebellion. The king of Elam was having none of that, so he gathered warriors from all around and squashed the rebellion, killing thousands, pillaging their cities and taking the remaining people captive. Among those captives taken from the city of Sodom was Abram's nephew, Lot. We don't know why he did it, perhaps to free his family member, but Abram gathered his own army and drove out the Elamites, freeing the five cities and their people.

Somehow in the midst of all that war and destruction, the people of these cities took a turn for the worse and were totally evil – so much so that God decided it would be good

to do away with them. Now you and I would probably say, “If they’re that awful that God wants to destroy them, why do that?” Or even suggest that the bad people could just be weeded out and the good people could stay. But Abram had heard the rumor about the impending destruction of everyone and it concerned him greatly. So, when three strangers came to his village and were welcomed by Abram into his home, the rumor became a reality. The Scriptures call these three angels of God but doesn’t tell who they actually were or why they were even travelling to Abram’s village. But they revealed to Abram what God intended.

Having confirmed God’s intention, the three set out to continue their journey on to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. We won’t dwell on the chaos that occurred while they were guests in Lot’s home. Suffice it to say, things did not look good for them or any of Lot’s family when the villagers came looking for these strangers. While this was unfolding, there was Abram, making his plea with God to spare the cities. Though it doesn’t take the same format as prayer that is familiar to us, nonetheless, Abram was engaged in a desperate prayer with God.

He began bargaining. What if there were 45 good people, would God spare the cities? God said yes. Well, what about 40? And what about 30? Then what about 20? And finally, what if there were 10 decent people? God said yes, he would spare them. Sadly, as the story unfolded, there were not even 10 righteous people in the whole area. As a result, not only Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed, but so were Admah and Zeboim. Only Beta was spared. We know that the only folks who made it out alive were Lot and

his family – except for his wife who didn't listen to the instructions about leaving, looked back though she was told not to, and was turned into a pillar of salt. Not a pretty picture.

The question arises then, what was the point of Abram's persistent prayer? And what about our prayers?

Abram asked God for more patience, more mercy, more grace. His persistence is something that is surely received by God. That's the connection to Luke's account of Jesus teaching his disciples about prayer – specifically, how to pray. Sure, the passage begins with what the modern church calls the "Lord's Prayer" and there are ten thousand sermons to be given about that. But it's what follows in the passage that connects Jesus to Abram.

The core message seems to be "be persistent." Need to bug your neighbor in the middle of the night for some bread for your unexpected guests? Keep knocking even when he says "no" several times. If you are just persistent, he'll get up and give you what you asked for. He'll change his mind. One common thread between the story of Abram and this neighbor is that we should be persistent in our prayers, continuing to ask God for whatever is our request.

Sometimes our persistent asking turns into bargaining, just like Abram. We want to change God's mind. Or at least aim for a different outcome. And guess what!? You and I do that, too. You don't think so? Well, jokingly, every time I pay \$2 for a Powerball lottery ticket, my inner voice says, "Now God, if you let me win this huge multi-million-dollar pot, I promise I'll give the church enough for

a new building and I'll even give some so the pastor has his own mansion." Then I laugh. Maybe your prayer is something like this, "Lord, if you just make these surgeries work and we can get through this health crisis, I'll really try to be a happier person." Those are my bargaining prayers, and trust me, they have been persistent. They were not or are not just a one-time 'say it and forget it' prayer. And I think if everyone is honest, each of us can say the same.

We pray at church. We pray at home. We pray in many places and for many things. So how do we know when and how God is listening and responding? What does the church say that is honest and loving about a life of persistent prayer? First, we need to know that prayer is not in vain, even when we admit that it is not a magic formula. Don't stop praying even if you feel discouraged or hopeless. Second, even the life of Christ is centered on the principle of "your will be done" and not mine. And lastly, we need the assurance that persistent prayer comes with the promise of the presence of the Holy Spirit. The gift of persistent prayer is that it brings us into a transforming relationship with God.

As we pray, we should acknowledge God is our God, and we need to let God's will – not ours – be done. You can ask whatever you think sustains you, including the hard stuff, or even the things we think are impossible. But when you do persistently pray, get ready. Expect a result or response. Be ready to be held close by the Holy Spirit; be ready to be challenged; be ready to be blessed; and be ready even to be changed by the Spirit.

But whatever you do, pray with persistence. It's a simple message that rings true from Abram to Jesus to you. One word of caution here. If, even in persistent prayers, things don't happen the way you had asked, don't blame God. I have found that even in the most difficult times of my life when I have prayed fervently and persistently, the outcome was not at all what I had asked. However, when I stopped questioning why I did not get what I bargained for, in time I found that the reward I did get was to draw closer to the Lord.

So no, I don't own a mansion and likely never will, nor have I ever won a lottery. But what I did receive in the silly requests and the deep, persistent heartfelt begging was the overpowering sense of God's comfort and a sense of closeness to my Lord. Like Abram, we might not find the 10 righteous people or like the neighbor, we may eventually get a loaf of bread for our guests. But whatever the result, that might not be the object of the lesson. Perhaps what God is teaching us is to faithfully pray until we come to a place where we can move on. When the scriptures say we are to "pray without ceasing," that's the core of the teaching of Christ. Don't give up. Be persistent. Keep praying.