

The Promised Land
Sermon for the 21st Sunday after Trinity
Sermon Text: Genesis 13:1-18



So Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the Negeb. ² Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold. ³ And he journeyed on from the Negeb as far as Bethel to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, ⁴ to the place where he had made an altar at the first. And there Abram called upon the name of the Lord. ⁵ And Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents, ⁶ so that the land could not support both of them dwelling together; for their possessions were so great that they could not dwell together, ⁷ and there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram's livestock and the herdsmen of Lot's livestock. At that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites were dwelling in the land. ⁸ Then Abram said to Lot, "Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herdsmen and my herdsmen, for we are kinsmen. ⁹ Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right, or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left." ¹⁰ And Lot lifted up his eyes and saw that the Jordan Valley was well watered everywhere like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, in the direction of Zoar. (This was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.) ¹¹ So Lot chose for himself all the Jordan Valley, and Lot journeyed east. Thus they separated from each other. ¹² Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled among the cities of the valley and moved his tent as far as Sodom. ¹³ Now the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord. ¹⁴ The Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, ¹⁵ for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. ¹⁶ I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. ¹⁷ Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you." ¹⁸ So Abram moved his tent and came and settled by the oaks of Mamre, which are at Hebron, and there he built an altar to the Lord.

Two donkeys, Dino and Paul, were best friends. Their master had connected them with a rope so that they didn't go astray. This wasn't a big problem for them because they usually always wanted the same thing. They shared the same fate and always wanted to go in the same direction. When Dino wanted to go left, Paul did the same, and vice versa. Both were often of the same opinion until one day, they stood in a sand pit. Dino saw a wonderful meadow to the left while Paul spotted an equally beautiful meadow in the opposite direction on the right. On this day, the donkeys no longer shared the same viewpoint. They pulled in opposite directions on the rope, struggling and sweating, until they were so exhausted, they got stuck in the sand pit. Suddenly, Dino had an idea, and he suggested a compromise. "Let's stop fighting and start to share again. We'll first go to your meadow and afterwards, we'll spend the same amount of time in my meadow." The donkeys agreed and they were happy again to remain tethered together. The story of the two donkeys is a human story, the outcome of which would certainly be desirable for many human conflicts. In a world that is moving ever closer together, people's needs are colliding. It is becoming increasingly difficult to meet everyone's needs. The demands for space and justice are great, as resources become ever scarcer. The willingness to find compromises between different people is therefore becoming increasingly difficult.

We hear a similar story today from the Old Testament. The story isn't one of the most well-known stories of the Bible, therefore it's even more interesting to learn how Abram and Lot resolve a conflict together at that time. The conflict between Abram and Lot had three main reasons: first, the little bit of space they came to was too small to support them all. Second, they had to deal with hostile powers in their region. Third, there was strife between the servants of both families. So a solution was necessary. In this respect, the story of Abram and Lot is similar to the story of the two donkeys in my example. If a conflict is to be resolved, someone must take the initiative. In the vernacular, it is often said: "The smartest person gives in first." This can be very difficult in some circumstances, particularly if you are good friends or closely related, then it is difficult to bring up problems. In such situations, we often ask questions like: "What should I say? What consequences could this have for me? If I take the initiative, I may make myself vulnerable. What happens when my opponent takes advantage of my trust?" These questions show how timeless and relevant the story of Abram is even in our day and age.

It's amazing how calmly Abram handles this whole situation. When he was still in Egypt, he showed very different behavior. At that time, he couldn't completely believe in God's promise and feared that Pharaoh would kill

him so that Pharaoh could claim Abram's beautiful wife for himself. So Abram lied and pretended that Sarai was really his sister. The story with Lot shows a changed version of Abram because he had faith and trust in God. Abram stood with Lot on a hill in Bethel and both looked out onto the green expanse of the Jordan Valley that stretched before them to the east. In the west, they could see the blue mountains of the Jordan. It was obvious which land was the best: the fruitful fields of the Jordan Valley. Nevertheless, Abram remained calm and gave priority to his nephew Lot, firmly trusting that God would sort out the situation. Abram behaved fairly and politely, while Lot took advantage of his relative's generosity and claimed the best for himself. There is more hidden behind this story about Abram and Lot than we first expect. Abram is considered the "father of faith," and therefore, we are Abraham's children. As members of Abraham's family, we can learn from his fate.

In the story of God's people, there have been great mountains and overwhelming enemies. Sometimes, everything seemed to come to a standstill and there was little hope of a good outcome. This repeats itself throughout the entire story of God's people. The first Christians were hopelessly thrown into jail or to wild animals to be eaten. It was clear to everyone that there was no place in this world for Christians. God's mission seemed to end at the hard walls of the prisons under a certain king named Nero. Jesus Himself had said that it would be like this. The persecution of Christians has grown throughout the world to this day. Many Iranian Christians and pastors find themselves at this time in prison or are even killed. Many other countries have similar conditions.

The devil doesn't want to idly watch how Christians proclaim God's Word and how people are saved. He tries to silence them with everything he has in his arsenal. When that is the case, we shouldn't wonder that we can also feel the power of evil. Yes, even in free countries in Europe, we sometimes feel restricted and marginalized from all sides. In some cases, having a relative who rejects the faith may be a reason. However, it's the worst when unbelief comes from within our own ranks. The devil doesn't stop at our own hearts and uses every mean, even our own weaknesses, to unsettle our faith in Jesus Christ or to discourage us from talking about Him. Even the church often asks the question, why so many steep mountains and challenges are placed in our way that seem to be indestructible. Sometimes it appears easier to not believe in God at all. Non-believers seem to run in the flat, green meadows and enjoy life while we struggle in the mountains. This phenomenon can be seen in many examples.

Abram's behavior is very impressive. He is not out to fight for his rights at any cost. Abram has been learning to rely on God's promises. At the beginning as well as at the end of this story, Abram makes an altar and gives thanks to God. Abram didn't know what the future would bring, and he couldn't have known that at this place where he built an altar, Jesus would be lifted up on a cross years later. At that time, the disciples of Jesus would stand stunned before His dead body, but their sorrow would turn into joy when they stood before the empty tomb and realized that God had defeated humanity's worst enemies. Abram dared to take the first steps of faith, and we follow his example. We also don't know what the future holds in store for us. Abram built an altar in the land where Jesus' cross would later be. This very cross was established in our lives through our baptism so that we know that we are God's heirs. That's why we mustn't fight about things or be afraid of losing them. We mustn't be jealous or suspicious of what others have. Even when fewer and fewer people go to church, we should remain full of trust. In the story of Abram, it seems as if God puts him at a disadvantage by giving him the more mountainous land. Only much later, did Abram realize, looking back, that he had actually drawn the best lot because neither Lot nor Abram knew at that time that there were terrible enemies in the green Jordan Valley which would later cause trouble for Lot.

Just like Abram, we can't see what God has planned for us. Much of what we do in faith, such as celebrating Holy Communion, reading the Bible, and even going to church and praying, may be difficult for the mind to understand. We should accept that and trust that one day, our eyes will be opened. Then, like the two donkeys Dino and Paul, we will be amazed at ourselves and realize that many things in life are easier than we first thought. Amen.