# Congregational-Presbyterian Church

**“Thin Places”**

**Genesis 13:1-9**

**June 12, 2022**

Our summer sermon series is titled “Walking with Abraham,” and last week we began the walk, so to speak, in Genesis 12. The chapter begins with the call of God to Abram (God had not yet changed his name to “Abraham”) that Abram leave his home, take his family, and go to the land that God will show him. Abram went as God had instructed, and when he came to Shechem in the land of Canaan, the Lord appeared to Abram and told him, “This is the land.” Abram built an altar there at Shechem and dedicated it to the Lord. Later, Abram travelled a little further south and set up camp near Bethel. In that place he built another altar, dedicated it to the Lord, and worshipped God.

Things were good between God and Abram until a severe famine struck the land of Canaan, and Abram’s faith was tested. Rather than seeking God to find out how he might remain where he ought to be, he decided to take his family down to Egypt. In that place, everything went wrong. Fearing for his life because his wife Sarai was beautiful and killing him would allow someone else to marry her, he told Sarai to lie and say that she was his sister. In that case, the Egyptians would treat him with honor because of their interest in his so-called sister.

Sure enough, when they arrived in Egypt, the king’s officials took note of Sarai’s beauty and she was taken into Pharaoh’s palace as one of his wives. Abram was given many gifts by Pharaoh because of her, but God was not pleased. He had plans for Abram and Sarai and the child they would eventually have together, so he sent terrible plagues upon Pharaoh and his household. Pharaoh discovered the reason for what had befallen him, realizing that he had taken as his wife someone who was already married, so he told Abram to take back his wife and leave his country. This brings us to Genesis 13, and I invite you to turn there with me as we read the first nine verses

So Abram left Egypt and traveled north into the Negev, along with his wife and Lot and all that they owned. (Abram was very rich in livestock, silver, and gold.) From the Negev, they continued traveling by stages toward Bethel, and they pitched their tents between Bethel and Ai, where they had camped before. This was the same place where Abram had built the altar, and there he worshiped the Lord again. Lot, who was traveling with Abram, had also become very wealthy with flocks of sheep and goats, herds of cattle, and many tents. But the land could not support both Abram and Lot with all their flocks and herds living so close together. So disputes broke out between the herdsmen of Abram and Lot. (At that time Canaanites and Perizzites were also living in the land.) Finally Abram said to Lot, “Let’s not allow this conflict to come between us or our herdsmen. After all, we are close relatives! The whole countryside is open to you. Take your choice of any section of the land you want, and we will separate. If you want the land to the left, then I’ll take the land on the right. If you prefer the land on the right, then I’ll go to the left.”

This past week, in our Bible Reading Plan authored by Pastor McLane, he had us read Psalm 37:23-24, “The Lord directs the steps of the godly. He delights in every detail of their lives. Though they stumble, they will never fall, for the Lord holds them by the hand.” Abram’s journey with God is a living illustration of these verses. So are your journey and my journey. Though we stumble, though we disobey, though we look at life’s challenges and take our own path rather than remain on God’s path, he will not let us fall for he holds us by the hand. Have you ever held the hand of a little child learning how to walk? Though they stumble, you will not let them fall, for you hold their hand securely in yours.

God held on tightly to Abram’s hand, even in the land of his disobedience, and he guided Abram back to the place, back to Bethel, where he had built an altar to the Lord, and there Abram worshiped the Lord again. One of God’s many ways of bringing us back to himself after we have wandered off is to bring us back to a place or experience or relationship where we felt God’s presence. In the Christian tradition, these places have at times been called “thin places,” places where we have sensed that the separation we feel between ourselves here on earth and God up in heaven is especially thin.

A thin place in my life when I was growing up was a youth camp called Eagle Lake, located at about 9,000 feet above sea level in the Pikes Peak mountain range west of Colorado Springs. It was at Eagle Lake, at the age of 10, that I first asked Jesus to be my Lord and Savior. At the age of 15, attending a trail camp at Eagle Lake, I recommitted my life to Christ and determined that I wanted to serve him. When I was 18, a very close friend was killed by a drunk driver. I began questioning the goodness of God and began drifting away from my faith. Then, at a college retreat held at Eagle Lake, I took a long midnight hike around the Lake and discovered that while I had moved away from God, he was still holding my hand. I may have stumbled, but I had not fallen. A couple years later I returned to Eagle Lake as a camp counselor and met a young lady from the Pacific Northwest named Lauri Graham. The next summer we were married. I have only been back to Eagle Lake a couple of times since then, but it will always be for me a “thin place” where God showed me his love for me and where I learned to hold on tight to his guiding and protecting hand.

Other thin places in my life have included my parents who, though now dead for quite a few years, will always be for me people who showed me what it means to live close to God. Another thin place for me is Lauri, for with her by my side these almost 42 years, I have experienced again and again through her the blessing of God encouraging me when I’m down, embracing me when I’m sad, and reminding me of the fruit of my ministry when I feel like I’m just spinning my wheels as a pastor. And, every morning when I spend time in God’s Word and in prayer, laying out before God the issues of my life, I am aware that I am in a thin place with God. I feel his presence – this is “holy ground” in my life.

The great thing about “Walking with Abraham” is learning that like him, when we sin, when we wrestle with life’s problems and fail, God does not distance himself from us but uses our failure to draw us closer to himself. Like Abram, even when we resist God, we can end up loving him more than ever before.