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Abram separating from Lot and building altars in the land; feeding on Jesus' flesh and blood.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Genesis 13. So Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that he had, and lot with him into the Negev. Now Abram was very rich in livestock in silver and in gold, and he journeyed on from the Negev as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, to the place where he had made an altar at the first.

And there Abram called upon the name of the Lord. And Lot who went with Abram also had flocks and herds and tents, so that the land could not support both of them dwelling together, for their possessions were so great that they could not dwell together. 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. 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. 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, I will go to the left. 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.

So Lot chose for himself all the Jordan valley, and Lot journeyed east. Thus they separated from each other. Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled among the cities of the valley, and moved his tent as far as Sodom.

Now the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord. 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, for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. 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.

Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you. 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.

As we saw yesterday, chapters 12 and 13 of Genesis are tightly structured. There is a relationship between these two chapters as Abraham walks a path, goes down into Egypt and then returns from Egypt and retraces many of his steps. When he returns to the land, he returns to the places where he has been before.

And at this point, he took Lot with him earlier, but now there is a division. There are two characters that have a relationship with Abraham. It's unclear.

Is Sarai Abraham's wife or is she his sister? How is she going to relate to the fulfillment of the promises? Likewise with Lot. Is Lot going to be put in the category of son or is he going to be put in the category of brother? Is God going to fulfill his promises to Abraham through Lot or is Lot somewhere with a different destiny? At the beginning of the narrative, it seems as if Lot is the person through whom God will fulfill his promises to Abraham. Abraham takes his dead brother's son with him and it seems as if he's the one that God might fulfill the promises with.

But Lot in this chapter takes a different course as they separate. Both Lot and Abraham have significant wealth, great flocks and they are competing with each other. And as a result, they have to separate, going their different ways, leading to a greater separation as Lot heads towards Sodom.

There's division within the family and it means that Lot can no longer be straightforwardly categorized as a son. He's not the one through whom Abraham's name is going to be made great. He's not going to be the one through whom the nation is established.

Which throws open the question again, how is God going to fulfill his promise to Abraham? Now Lot and Abraham are often held alongside each other, juxtaposed with each other. One character is seen to have a certain set of characteristics and the other another. In the book of Genesis, there are several such juxtapositions of characters.

Cain and Abel, Esau Jacob, Judah Joseph, Sarai Hagar, Abraham Lot and Leo Rachel. You can think of a number of others perhaps. But it's not a straightforward good-bad juxtaposition.

Often there are characters that are both flawed but are related to each other in ways that are significant in other respects, highlighting different characteristics by that comparison. Later on as we read the story, Lot will be explicitly referred to as a brother. It's a relationship that helps us to hold Lot and Abraham over against each other and see their destinies being played out against each other.

We'll see this especially as we get to chapters 18 and 19. At the end of this passage, God promises the land to Abraham. The Lord said to Abraham, 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, for all the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever.

God has already promised that he will make Abraham and his family great. But what he does in this chapter is promise that he will give them a place, a particular place where they will be made great, that they will inherit, that they will be settled in this particular land. And as we read through the story here, it's important to notice that Abraham is involved in construction.

In chapter 11, there was an attempt to make the name of the builders of Babel great. They wanted to build this great city and tower to build a legacy for themselves that would avoid death. They built a tower and yet God undermined their project and it came to nothing.

What does Abraham do as he goes from place to place? As God gives him promises, he builds altars. An altar is something that lasts for a long time, but the purpose of the altar is not to make the name of the altar builder great, but the one to whose name the altar is erected. Abraham, wherever he goes, is establishing the worship of God.

He's seeking to make God's name great. There is a juxtaposition here with the builders of Babel, that they sought to make their name great, Abraham seeks to make God's

name great. He's going throughout the land and at these significant sites between Bethel and Ai, at Shechem, and other such sites, sites that anticipate the later story of Israel, the sites and the events that will define its identity, the scars upon the life and body of Israel, those events that help to determine its destiny.

At each of these sites, in significant anticipation of what's to come, he is building altars, establishing the worship of God in that location. Also notice how Abraham holds things with an open hand. He allows Lot, the person on whom his hopes may have been placed for the continuing of his legacy, to depart from him, to go his own way.

And he's left with merely Sarai and the rest of his household around him. He has no son of his own. And so he's wandering throughout the land, living in tents.

He does not have a settled location that belongs to him. He's depending upon the promises of God. And this example of faith is one that we'll see throughout the story of Abraham.

That he lives in the land that he will inherit as a stranger. And anticipating God's promises, he builds altars to make God's name great. To seek God's glory, not his own.

A question to think about. As Lot looks out over the land, it is described as similar to the Garden of God and to the land of Egypt. Why those particular comparisons? What might be some of the important connotations of such descriptions? John chapter 6 verses 41 to 71.

Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it. And not die.

I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, how can this man give us his flesh to eat? So Jesus said to them, truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.

Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven.

Not like the bread the fathers ate and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever. Jesus said these things in the synagogue as he taught at Capernaum.

When many of the disciples heard it, they said, this is a hard saying, who can listen to it?

But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, do you take offence at this? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the Spirit who gives life. The flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.

But there are some of you who do not believe. For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe and who it was who would betray him. And he said, this is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.

After this, many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. So Jesus said to the twelve, do you want to go away as well? Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God. Jesus answered them, did I not choose you, the twelve, and yet one of you is a devil? He spoke of Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was going to betray him.

Jesus here continues his discourse with the Jews following the feeding of the five thousand and his representation of himself as the manna. The Jews merely know Jesus according to the flesh. They see him as the son of Mary and Joseph and can't truly conceive of who he is.

Again, it's important to remember here that the Jews in this passage, as elsewhere in John, are typically the Judean leaders. It's not the descendants of Abraham more generally. It's not the people of the land.

It's the Jewish leaders, the leaders of the Judean people. Not necessarily the people in Galilee, but the people at the heart of the nation around Jerusalem. John doesn't directly reference the virgin birth, but I imagine that many of the readers of John would have been familiar with the other gospel accounts and this would have brought it to mind.

The Jews do not know Jesus' ultimate origin, and so they cannot accept the fact that he has come down from heaven. The language of I have come is found in the other gospels as well. We see it in Matthew chapter 5, for instance, in parts of Mark.

And the language is the language that we see used of angels, of angelic messengers that are sent by God to bring a particular message to the people who are on a particular mission. It's language that suggests a pre-existence in heaven before the earthly mission. Jesus uses such language on a number of occasions in John's gospel, highlighting the fact that his earthly life was not the beginning of his mission, was not the beginning of his existence and identity.

Something that is underlined from the very beginning of the gospel. The Jews, in response to this, grumble like the children of Israel in the wilderness. Israel grumbled before receiving the manna, but they grumble at the offer of that to which the sign of the

manna pointed.

Jesus speaks of the father drawing people to himself, much as the Old Testament prophets speak of God drawing Israel to himself in the wilderness or after the exile. That he's going to restore this people, and in an act of love he draws his bride to himself in the wilderness. Jesus connects that drawing of the father with the prophetic statements concerning the restored people of God, whom God would teach, enlighten and graciously draw to himself.

And this has often come up in debates about free will and predestination. But in scripture, and particularly in John's gospel, these things aren't seen to be in conflict. You can maybe think of it in terms of love.

Love both liberates and binds the will. When you are in love, there's nothing that you felt more willing about. But yet at the same time, that will is so forceful and directed that you feel bound by it.

And in the same way as God reveals his glory and the truth of Christ to people, they are drawn to him. Not as a matter of external compulsion, but of internal will that they wish to come to him because their eyes have been opened to see who he is. Jesus presents himself as the great prophet, the great teacher from God foretold by Moses.

And the work of the father through his ministry is bringing the prophecies of God, teaching the people, the prophecies that we find concerning the new covenant in places like Jeremiah chapter 31, he's bringing these things to pass. Jesus is giving his flesh like manna for the life of the world. And this occurs in the gift of his body at the cross.

He speaks in the most startling language, eating his flesh and drinking his blood in a way that would have provoked both the taboo of cannibalism and the consumption of blood, which Israel was forbidden to do. Some suggest a connection with Passover themes. Jesus is the Passover lamb and he offers the flesh of the Passover lamb to eat.

And as Israel spoke of the blood of grapes being drunk at Passover, so his blood would be enjoyed as a form of participation in the benefits of his sacrifice. Elsewhere we see similar language of eating bread and drinking wine in places like Proverbs chapter 9, as wisdom lays her feasts and gives herself as food to people. There are allusions to sacramental themes throughout this passage.

You can see at the very beginning the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus breaks the bread, gives thanks, he distributes it. It's language that would bring to mind the celebration of the Eucharist.

You can think also about the manna, bread that has come down from heaven. The bread of God, that's the language used of the sacrifices in the Old Testament. The priests are the ones who offer the bread of their God.

The tree of life language, eating and living forever. The fact that Jesus becomes flesh matters greatly. He gives his body for the life of the world.

It's the actual physical material sacrifice of his body on the cross that is the means of his self-donation. John doesn't have an account of the institution of the supper. The language here focuses particularly upon Christ's death as the moment in which these things are donated and in connection with which these things will be enjoyed.

Earlier on he talked about Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness and in the same way Christ will be lifted up so that all that look to him will be saved. Now Christ again is presenting his gift of himself in his death as the means by which people will have life. And here the language is not so much looking as the language of eating and drinking, of participating in his sacrifice.

Here I think John is drawing upon sacramental themes and I believe he wants us to connect this with the celebration of the Eucharist. But in a way that expresses the fact that the Eucharist is always about the reality of Christ's death, the gift of his body in that. It's not the mere physical eating that is the important thing.

It's the gift of Christ's life in his sacrifice. Jesus' identity is the one who comes down from heaven and this will be proven as he returns there. We are supposed to subsist on Christ's flesh, eating it continually.

This is the way that we abide in him. Now that I believe is something that is in the symbol of the Eucharist this is actually participated in. But the spirit is the one who gives life, not the flesh.

Christ's words are the gift of life. This isn't about some sort of magic and the danger of trust in the flesh or religion and these sorts of things are things that John is very alert to. And Jesus as he teaches within John's Gospel highlights.

So when we're thinking about the Eucharist I believe it's important to see it as a form of Christ's gift of his body. A means by which we participate in his body and his blood. But we must do so in a way that foregrounds not a fleshly act of eating but the work of the spirit and the work of the word.

And this is something that I believe that the Protestant tradition has been very concerned to do. Not to empty the Eucharist of its reality that this is a true participation in Christ's body and blood. But to do so in a way that heightens the emphasis upon the spirit as the one by which these things are donated and enjoyed.

And that Christ's word is that which makes the sacrament effective. It's not some sort of magic. Jesus ends by speaking about Judas as a devil and Peter as a faithful disciple.

Peter is the one who recognizes that Jesus' words are the words of eternal life. There's no

one else to go to. This is the means by which you will have salvation.

This is the means by which you will enter into the life that is the life of the age to come. One final question. John's gospel emphasizes that Moses is a witness to Christ, the greater prophet that was to come.

The Jews supposed allegiance to Moses yet rejection of Christ is deeply ironic for this reason. Can you think of other places in the gospel where Moses is presented as a witness to Christ?