

4

THE HOPE OF PROMISE

WHILE IT IS possible that promises come with specific timelines and other concrete particularities, more often than not, I believe, promises are made without the often-hoped-for specificities. In the case of Abraham and Sarah, promise is made in the context of uncertainty, powerlessness, and barrenness; and as I have noted earlier, the narrative begins on a note of serious and urgent challenge. Whatever else will transpire in the life of Abraham and Sarah will happen in the seemingly impossible state of barrenness. Until Genesis 11:29, the narrative focus is on the ancestry and posterity of Terah, Abraham's father, and practically nothing is said about Abraham and Sarah's posterity, except the spare and dramatic pronouncement that Sarah is barren.

Even though the scholarly convention is to divide Genesis between *primeval history* and the *ancestral narratives*, the themes of Genesis remind us that such a division, while helpful and important for scholarship, also overlooks significant theological associations between the two sections of Genesis. The theme of *divine promise* is one such theological association that does not allow for the striking separation to which we have become accustomed. The call of Abraham and Sarah, from the very inception, flies in the face of convention; promise for a future will be made in the context of barrenness, and at an age beyond childbearing expectation.

Among the connections between the two sections of Genesis is the topic of new beginnings, regularly generated in the face of noth-

ingness or hopelessness. Whether we understand creation as *creatio ex nihilo* or creation as *order out of chaos*, the promise to Abraham and Sarah, as we witness it in Genesis 11:30, is pronounced in the context of *nothingness*. Moreover, we are invited to notice clearly with Abraham and Sarah that it is precisely the God of all creation who brings into being new communities and the belief that anything is possible. Any- and everything would be possible, and indeed the hope that lies within a divine promise will be generated in time, in God's time.

It is as Brueggemann intimates: the history of Israel does not, in fact, begin *ex nihilo*, nor are the promises made to Abraham and Sarah pronounced in a vacuum.¹ It is precisely this unknown and uncertainty that will cause circumstances to transpire in the lives of Abraham and Sarah that will forever redirect their history and that of their community and their descendants. As we have explored above in chapter 1, hope often dies in the face of barrenness, and yet this is precisely the context in which the promise is pronounced. While it is the case that God makes a promise to Abraham and Sarah, the reality is that the scope of the promise moves beyond their immediate family unit into the uncharted realm of the future.

The divine promises made in Genesis 12:1–4 remind us of at least two things: First, to be sure, humans make promises to one another every moment of our lives. Designed to imagine a changed future, promises by nature cannot be made with an absolute guarantee of fulfillment. Even more so, divine promises are made clearly in a realm where humans are not able to create a particular future. Not surprisingly, the promise to Abraham and Sarah comes into a state of human barrenness, a state of being that human beings by themselves neither can transform nor are capable of changing. God does not simply set out to pronounce promises in challenging circumstances but rather makes promises in human community and circumstances where hope for a future cannot be generated by human ingenuity or creative endeavors.

Hope by its very nature has its core meaning and value in those circumstances when human conditions appear hopeless. Thus, as we reflect on God's promise of hope for Abraham and Sarah, we do so with the acknowledgment that such a future is beyond Abraham and

1. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 116.

Sarah's control. Divine hope is not a substitute for human capability and imagination.

Inasmuch as the spoken word ushered in a new creation in Genesis 1, either *ex nihilo* or through ordering, so also in what appears to be a state of barrenness that brings hopelessness, the spoken word "The Lord said . . ." promises hope. This is no ordinary human hope, certainly not a hope that can be easily fathomed. Indeed, the very assurance lies in the divine promise. The hope of promise as pronounced in Genesis 12:1–4 is not to be construed as enabling human passivity. This is to be an actual hope. Active hope in a divine promise brings with it certain challenges. On the one hand, the faith of the promise-bearer in the one who makes the promise must be such that the impulse to usurp the promise maker's role can never be realized. Both Abraham and Sarah, to varying degrees, succumb to this natural impulse. Thus, an active hope is not designed to allow one to take matters into one's own hands, but to help one to believe in that which cannot be seen, and to hope in a fulfillment in God's time. On the other hand, to wait for God's time is not to relinquish any personal responsibility; active hope unites waiting with expectation, moment to moment, day after day. While Abraham and Sarah will not be able to bring about the fulfillment, they nonetheless actively believe.

An essential ingredient to this hope for the future, this hope of promise, is not to hold on to a present reality that has no future. This inclination is equally tempting, and one must guard against such a vision that does not yield a future of hope. In all of this, the spoken word carries the drama of a future that lies beyond human comprehension. As the creation of the universe was, so also the creation of a people moves beyond the scope of human understanding.

However, the promises made to Abraham and Sarah are not without human responsibility; though the promises are finally not ever a matter of human responsibility. The promises of Genesis 12:1–4 establish a firm relational bonding between God and Abraham, and, through Abraham, between God and all humanity. In pronouncing the promise of descendants and nationhood, God sets out a clear prospect of hope for the future, which is beyond human ingenuity or control. But additional hope for the future is inextricably tied to Abraham, and again through him, all humanity. Whatever the plans that Abraham

and Sarah had for their lives, with these promises will come a new and perhaps more intensively hopeful future: one filled with prospects and purpose. Hope will be predicated on a new mandate—on a mandate that cannot be narrowly construed.

The promise cannot be understood in a narrow, parochial, and provincial way, for the very welfare of others will depend on the manner in which Abraham proceeds with his life. One thinks of Jeremiah's painful admonition to the exiles: that their welfare will be tied to that of their captors. Therein will lie their hope (Jeremiah 29). The hope of the future lies not only in Abraham's being blessed but in turn that in his being a blessing to others. Abraham and Sarah's blessings—and those of their descendants—must be connected to the blessing and well-being of all people. The hope for one family's future will be tied to (and indeed will be a generative force for) all peoples. This partnership of hope refuses to embrace distinctions of race and nationality, ethnicity and gender; and, indeed, the treading into the future means that conventional, provincial barricades or glass ceilings will be crushed. While neither Abraham nor Sarah raises objections to this challenging quest, the reality nonetheless is that they will have to renounce whatever it is that holds them in the present.

For many of us who live in a modern society, with all that contemporary society brings, this call of hope for a new future brings a substantial moment of renunciation of ties that bind, and a concurrent willingness to embrace a new vulnerability where the very unknown fluidity of the divine future is all that provides support and sustenance. Here are promises made in ancient times that do not allow us to cling to the present, howsoever secure the present might appear to be. Divine promises are radical assertions in the face of modernity, which lay claim to powers of production and means of newness. This is a genuine difficulty for moderns: to wrap ourselves around the idea of a hope for a future over which we have little or no control.

If there is any qualification made to Abraham, it is that his spoken word and his actions both have the force of shaping the lives of others. The drama of the ending of Genesis 11 and the start of Genesis 12 cannot be missed; one ends on a note of death and a resigned note of the present, while the other ushers in a newness based on a spoken word of promise. In all this, the promise of hope for a future will de-

fine faith and the life of faith of those who embrace such a promise. For as often as I read this text, I continue to ponder the nature of hope. As were our ancestors in faith (to whom we look, and who in their pilgrimages have lived lives of hope in the midst of despair, anxiety, hopelessness, and fear), so I am reminded repeatedly that a word that brings hope finds itself most typically resonant in a context where hope is concrete and often rooted in an acknowledgment of human finitude and limitation.

GENESIS 20: HOPE IN THE MIDST OF MISTRUST

It seems that for a while, punctuated by many moments of anxiety, Abraham allows the promise made to him about the future to languish, giving way to what is a human temptation of substance. When it appears that the word of promise disappears from Abraham's vision, he relies on his own ingenuity and wisdom. In fact, Abraham's anxiety not only serves as a clear reminder of human anxiety in the face of a future that can only be shaped by God's word—spoken and fulfilled; but also Abraham's anxiety reminds us that in the face of what might appear to be insurmountable obstacles, we seem to direct our attention and energy naturally in narrowly protective and provincial ways. Yet, as we have discovered from this narrative, not only is the promise beyond human control and constriction, but also, in fact, the promise stretches beyond human pain and distress to the "other"; and rather than hope, the "other" faces devastation: whether or not Abraham intends to bring curse on the "other," the reality is that his actions do bring a curse.

We have witnessed the bringing of a curse elsewhere biblically—for example, in Jonah's action on the ship bound for Tarshish (Jonah 1:3–10). When Jonah thinks only of himself and of his provincial plan, he endangers the life of the innocent. Part of the act of self-preservation brings with it the real possibility of endangering the lives of others, particularly if the one in the position to endanger others has a narrowly construed sense of self.

In Genesis 20, we witness the remarkable juxtaposition of Abraham's lack of faith to Abimelech's striking, perhaps surprising, goodness. This turnabout is clearly not what is expected. Abraham is the one expected to fear God, but it is Abimelech who does; Abraham

should be the source of blessing, but instead he brings the possibility of a curse; Abraham should be the one interacting with Yahweh, but instead it is the interaction between God and Abimelech that dominates the narrative landscape. Even as this episode begins with an element of distrust and “otherness” (Abraham himself is an alien), we have a sense the journey to the fulfillment of the promise will continue to face serious challenges based on contingencies. Moreover, even as the hope of the fulfillment proceeds, it seems that Abraham’s focus continues to be on the present, while the future remains unimagined. Abraham neglects to understand that the promise is much larger than he is.

Many of the consequences of Abraham’s anticipated fear play out in the encounter between Abimelech and Yahweh. As a further reminder, the one who will redefine the present for the sake of the future is God. Moreover, the human vision is set alongside the divine, universal scope. Abimelech, whom Abraham fears, will indeed become a player in the fulfillment, for it is Abimelech’s innocence and integrity of heart that are acted upon, and he, the “outsider,” is pronounced innocent (Gen 20:6). One is reminded again that God will employ whomever God chooses in the fulfillment of God’s promises, including those who are the subject of distrust. The very “other” whom Abraham distrusts is vindicated and deemed pious. Abimelech approaches and questions God in a manner not unlike Abraham’s advocacy and questioning of God on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18:23. It is God’s justice and mercy to which Abimelech appeals, and notably not only for himself but also for his people. One cannot help but witness the contrast between Abimelech and Abraham at this point.

If the hope for the future focuses exclusively on Abraham and his immediate family, as difficult and problematic as it would be, perhaps one could begin to comprehend Abraham’s behavior and attitude to the “other.” But the covenant moves beyond Abraham into the created order, and this relationship with the other must be established. Abimelech’s understanding of his role stands in juxtaposition to Abraham’s. It is not about Abimelech alone, as it is not about Abraham alone. Each in his own way represents a larger entity, and each in his own way is evidently willing to sacrifice the future and its prospects

for the sake of the present. Yet, in both instances, we are reminded that the future belongs neither to Abraham nor to Abimelech, but to God. We may be tempted to suggest that if both these men were above reproach, then they might have fulfilled the promise. But as is typically the case with God, the future is unfolded *despite*, not *because of*, human choice. The future unfolds in various states of challenges.

One is not impressed by Abraham's reasons for deciding that Abimelech cannot be trusted (Gen 20:11). Perhaps it is the case that the history of the relations might have led Abraham to this conclusion, but such preemptive generalizations are sure to be problematic, as clearly this one is. God will use whomever God desires, including those whom the promise bearer deems unworthy.

Abraham's lack of trust in Abimelech reflects something of his understanding of his faith (and indeed of his trust) in God. Moreover, Abimelech and God have an intense dialog regarding Abimelech's integrity (vv. 4–7). Abimelech pleads his case, and God acknowledges that, indeed, Abimelech is a person of integrity. He is not judged and characterized on the basis of his actions with Sarah; and, in fact, Abraham's concern ("they will kill me because of my wife" [v. 11]) is not even attended to.

Despite this lack of faith on Abraham's part, the fact is that the promise continues for all practical purposes unaltered, as we are again reminded unequivocally that the architect of the promise and its fulfillment is God, and not Abraham. Yet, the promise bearer will also not be abandoned, and as flawed as he might be, he carries the hope for the future, and others will have to give due regard. This preeminence, as Brueggemann suggests, "rests not on Abraham's virtue, but on God's hope."²

So, as we read this text with the idea of hope for the future in mind, we are reminded in no uncertain terms that Abraham has been and remains the one set apart for a purpose. From the outset, it has been clear that the journey to fulfillment would not be routine, self-evident, or for that matter without recurring moments of doubt and distrust. This particular episode is in many respects a striking reminder of the challenges of Abraham and the steadfastness of God. The constancy in the narrative is that of God, not of Abraham. It is

2. Ibid., 178.

a challenge to determine the worth of Abraham, except that he is the chosen one; the one who will, in fact, pray for Abimelech, for his restoration. The future, with all its hope, will be realized with the inclusion of all people, for Abraham's distrust of the "other" will only stand in strong distinction to the role of the "other." As if to intensify further the role of God, whereas Abraham brings fear and a curse to Abimelech and his people, God dispels fear and pronounces blessing to the people. The relationship of trust between God and Abimelech further ensures that Abimelech will not be made voiceless, and indeed God empowers the "other" to the degree that Abimelech challenges Abraham. It is the empowered "other" who makes Abraham answer and explain his actions without his inclination to justify them.

HOPE IN THE RIGHT SEASON (GENESIS 21)

The opening verse of Genesis 21 succinctly and unambiguously establishes God as the architect of the promise and its fulfillment. For Sarah, in time, in season, God fulfilled God's promise. This is the essence of the promise and its fulfillment: The time has come, and after the years of wondering, challenge, assurance, and human endeavor, the child of promise is now born. There is nothing about this journey that has been ordinary or routine, and when fulfillment comes, in many respects it occurs in the particularly ordinary circumstance of husband and wife.

But as we know, Abraham and Sarah are not an ordinary couple. This sometimes-neglected aspect of the promise and the birth of Isaac cannot and must not be forgotten. We are reminded in these opening verses that often the mysteries or promises of God occur in the realities of everyday life, in the routine of human circumstances. Miracles, as events far too commonly ascribed to the "otherworldly," indeed also happen in the concreteness of this world. The fulfillment of the promise granted to Sarah recalls for us the fulfillment of the promise made to Hannah: fulfillment in the face of a hopelessness that bore into the very being of Hannah (1 Sam 1-2).

As we reflect on this text as it aids us in characterizing hope deferred, then hope fulfilled for us, I would suggest at least three central ideas to be considered and pursued in understanding the generating theme of *hope in the right season*. First, one of the more overlooked

themes in this episode surrounds the centrality of the “spoken word.” Even as the “spoken word” dominates the landscape of Genesis 1 and the bringing of creation into being, Genesis 21 also serves as a pointed reminder that the divinely spoken word is the generating principle that brings about the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham and Sarah.

The juxtaposition of *ʾamar* and *dābar* in Genesis 21:1 is a seemingly ordinary rendering but in fact serves as a reminder that the creative force bringing about the fulfillment *is* the divine Word. Both these Hebrew terms are grounded in the spoken word. God has given his word; the reputation of God is at stake as God’s word is given. As if to underline this and to remind human beings, who are apt to forget, we are told that this is what God had said, and this is what God had promised—literally, this is what God had “worded” to Sarah. Moreover, this all occurred in God’s own time. For many, this has been an ongoing challenge. Yet, the spoken word will only be fulfilled in the right season, a season determined by God. But as we have discovered with Abraham and Sarah, the “word” rarely comes as humans expect or in the time frame that humans propose.

As much as any aspect of Genesis 21, “the word of God” has become a casualty of excessive use and misuse. The very quality of the known has also made it into something of a casualty. The “word of God” has to be understood beyond the common religious refrain that has far too often taken on the character of a phrase without concreteness. Indeed the very phrase seems to have found itself with a narrow ownership of certain religious groups. This phrase must move beyond a theological catch phrase that is used as a litmus test for belonging or orthodoxy. Rather, it seems to me that these two variations of the spoken word of God (*ʾamar* and *dābar*, *to say* and *to promise*) remind us that the “word of God” is rooted in Scripture, in the very concreteness of events of divine/human encounters. To neglect this history is to neglect that which has been bequeathed to us.

An inherent danger in texts such as these is that their very familiarity poses the possibility (perhaps even probability) of contempt. In general, when Scripture must come to us anew, repeatedly, a moment of newness must not cease to be in our consciousness a moment of astounding wonder. It seems to me that those of us who seek to listen to God’s word must at the same time be cognizant of the temptation to

make God's word humanity's word in a way that reflects *our* image and *our* timeline. God's word must reflect neither our image nor our timeline. Equally important, as Genesis 21:1 testifies, is ensuring that the divine word is not reduced to that which is abstract and untenable.

Second, even though it is clear that Genesis 21 focuses on the birth of Isaac and the hope for the future that this dramatic birth brings, the fulfillment also brings an unmistakable reminder that it comes in the context of conflict and challenges. Neither the pronouncement nor the fulfillment of a promise will come without pain and difficulty. Indeed, the very journey has been one shaped by a multitude of painful and difficult junctures.

The Hebrew in Genesis 21:9–10 is very instructive in guiding us in our understanding and interpretation of the larger narrative, and in particular toward the ongoing and perplexing reasons behind Sarah's decision to cast away Ishmael and Hagar. Certainly it is easy to conclude that Sarah is jealous, and this would seem to be a natural response for a mother. This idea might more reflect a contemporary sense of who we are and how we understand ourselves, but might not necessarily reflect the guidance of the text. It strikes me that as complex an issue as jealousy is, this section of the text suggests something beyond jealousy.

What exactly was Ishmael doing that caught Sarah's eye, and was this an isolated moment, or (more likely) was this an ongoing issue, so that with the momentous celebration of and for Isaac, Sarah's sharp, emotive maternal instinct came to the fore? I would suggest that Ishmael's action was an ongoing issue, if for no other reason than that we know that Sarah has expressed her emotions similarly before. The convention regarding verse 9 ("But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac.") has been to follow the Greek version, which adds "with her son Isaac." While this certainly has merit and many conclusions have been drawn in this version, nonetheless, it seems to me that the Hebrew rendering has great merit as well. Without the vision of the two brothers playing together, and whatever imagination this might have generated within, Sarah has made a determination on the basis of Ishmael's laughter. Could it be that laughter became the breaking point for Sarah? The very factor that causes the transformation in her life

now becomes the point of casting out of Ishmael. Could two sources of laughter not coexist? For Sarah, this coexistence would not be possible. Moreover, it is clear that this is about her son. Her Isaac. Her laughter.

In verse 10, the force and the possible consequences of the act of driving out Ishmael and Hagar must not be underestimated. “Out” in this regard is far away—it is in a way to be excommunicated. The decision has been made to cut them off from the only community they know and from the ones under whose roof they have found protection. Indeed, in casting them away, the years of serving and submitting do not matter. “Out” here means wilderness, and wilderness is inhospitable. Whether or not Sarah has called Ishmael by name is unknown, but we do know that in the instances when there are references, he remains nameless to her, and this particularly in verse 10 strikes a sharp contrast to the manner in which she speaks about Isaac. The concern is “*with my son*,” “*with Isaac*.” There is precision here, and in this precision, the focus is not only on Isaac, but the focus is exclusively on Isaac.

Even as Isaac is born, Ishmael is in the shadows. The joy of Sarah is matched by the pain of Hagar and Ishmael. Fulfillment will bring for Sarah not only the drama of laughter but also the recognition that this laughter will only continue with displacement. Literally, brothers will not be able to dwell together. Can there be laughter also for Ishmael? Perhaps the years of seeing Ishmael in the house serve as a reminder of what might not have been. Perhaps as long as there had been no “laughter” in the house, Ishmael would be tolerated. But now the time has come, and Ishmael must go. Would his presence dull the laughter? It is Sarah’s proclamation that everyone will laugh with her (v. 6), though perhaps not quite everyone. For Sarah everyone who hears will laugh. Will God laugh with Sarah? We know that God hears, and we know that God had heard Hagar and Ishmael, and that God has acted. The only one whose hearing matters had heard the cries of Ishmael and Hagar. Even the sound of the laughter will not silence the voicelessness of the mother and child now about to be exiled.

God had heard before, and with the hearing had brought a promise and blessing to Hagar and Ishmael. Both sons will be granted blessings. The gift of Isaac in God’s season has a particular role, but Ishmael is also blessed by God, and he too in God’s season will emerge

as a free person. Freedom will come out of exile, even as here the advent of laughter brings pain. Despite the manner in which these stories and the respective sons have been reflected upon and characterized over time, the reality is that the sons are not exclusive of each other; and, indeed, their lives will intertwine, and their posterity will forever be connected. Sarah and Abraham must know that wilderness experiences are not beyond the capacity of God, for God hears. Moreover, as we hear this story of laughter and the silent despair of Hagar and Ishmael, we are willed to recall that such laughter comes to a couple that once despaired themselves, and that fought to bring fulfillment in *their* time. As Ishmael, the brother who might not know laughter or share in his brother's laughter, moves into the wilderness where there is little prospect for life, he and we might be reminded that God's future of hope and fulfillment is not predicated on the basis of human potential.

Hope springs from the spoken and promising word of God in the midst of conflicts and challenges. Third, hope comes beyond the margin. Even though Sarah seems to cast out Hagar and Ishmael, the reality is that there is no indication that the casting away of Hagar and Ishmael is necessary for the future promise of Isaac. Certainly Sarah's action raises a fundamental question about the mutual coexistence of those who must share a place of belonging. As we witness in God's encounter with Hagar and Ishmael (Gen 21:17–19), God's providence does not end at the margin of human existence. The granting of newness and life moves beyond societal and covenantal constraints to a tapestry that is textured, and at times seemingly messy and remarkably conflicting. But to the infinite, such human boundaries and margins fade into a faraway horizon. Indeed, the celebration of Isaac stands alongside the despair of Ishmael; the feast of Isaac and the famine of Ishmael will all shape the hope of the future.

It seems to me that Sarah's decision (and whatever margins and boundaries we have created to keep others out and apart from those within the circle) flies in the face of God's plan and providence. On whatever basis Sarah's decision might have been made, the text in no way inflicts judgment on Ishmael. Indeed, according to Genesis 21:9, the brothers are playing [Hebrew: "laughing"] together. If the brothers are playing together as the Septuagint and Vulgate establish, or even

if only Ishmael is playing/laughing, as the Hebrew suggests, in either scenario the implications for Sarah and for us are striking. The text is clear: it is possible (and circumstances make it necessary) for both the brothers to have laughter. Laughter and joy cannot be reserved only for the “insider.” There must be a place for brothers to be together, to know of each other’s role, and to be able to laugh together.

In the eyes of God, Ishmael is not discarded. The power granted to Abraham and Sarah is one that God grants, and the freedom that they have been given to make good choices also affords them the opportunity and freedom to make bad and painful ones. This is one such painful choice. There is no inclination that the one elected to carry on the promise will be affected by the “other.”

In relief we have here a portrait of a family, a microcosm of a society that makes clear that the coexistence of people with different roles and callings must be realized. If the journey of the promise toward fulfillment is any indication, then certainly one of the lessons learned is that with the fulfillment of hope for a future will also come the distinct possibility of new and ongoing challenges. Hope cannot be construed and shaped only for the ones set apart. We have already witnessed in triplicate the distrust of Abraham (and Isaac) of the Pharaoh, and the consequences that such distrust brought. Accommodation must be given for the “other,” for those whose lives are on the margin and beyond.

Sarah does what we are never invited to do: Neither is she, nor are we, invited to choose between the sons. This is not a part of the promise. In casting Ishmael away into the wilderness (a place, paradoxically, of both death and newness to life), Sarah enacts a banishment that hints at death and the end of the journey. But we know that the journey for Hagar and Ishmael was established in the first place by God in the wilderness, running counter to Sarah and Abraham’s plans (Gen 16). Even castaways who evidently interfere with plans of the human elect have divine promises granted to them.

The exiling of Hagar and Ishmael again serves a further significant moment in that it not only appeals to readers’ hearts, but, in fact, it stands yet again as a moment for divine intervention. Human plans, even the ones instituted by God, cannot, must not, stand as a barricade to the plans of God.

The fulfillment of the promise carried by Isaac will *not* lead to divine abandonment even though there is human rejection. As God once did, so again God will provide for the one who has been cast away from the only community he knows. Genesis 21 might be traditionally bracketed as a text about the birth and laughter of Isaac, but this event does not exhaust divine hope for the “other.” For anyone who reads or hears these words, in the midst of the pain comes an unyielding quality of divine hope. All is not lost, though for a while it might appear that way. In planning for Isaac’s future, Sarah distresses Ishmael’s present and casts his future in doubt. In generations to come, the descendants of Isaac, the sons of Jacob, will encounter the descendants of Ishmael, the Ishmaelites, and it will be an encounter of pain and distrust (Gen 37). The future of these brothers will indeed have far-reaching effects beyond anything that Sarah and Abraham might imagine. But God imagines and provides, and when the final toll is taken on Ishmael, the text makes it clear that Ishmael maintains a present and a future in the midst of despair and of Sarah’s abandonment. We know with certainty that as the birth of Isaac comes to fruition, and this divine gift is celebrated—that the rest of creation continues to be blessed.

HOPE IN RECONCILIATION (GENESIS 32–33)

As I have suggested in the previous chapter, fulfillment of a promise comes on the heels of both human and divine encounters. Just as his grandmother Sarah, in her interaction with Hagar and Ishmael, carried a future and hope born of conflict, so also Jacob carried a future and a hope born of conflict—ongoing conflict. Here too in Genesis 32 and 33 we have the peculiar juxtaposition of blessing and conflict held together; and yet on this the future hope will be forged. This episode helps us in creating a perspective for the Isaac and Ishmael relationship. There must be a place in the future where hope for both brothers will come to fruition. The brothers will be reconciled, but reconciliation will not be routinely simple, and indeed it can finally only come about after much angst and fear. This fear and trepidation is further underlined by the divine intervention on their behalf at the eleventh hour, in literally a life-saving drama: Ishmael dying of thirst (Gen 21:19) and Isaac is about to be sacrificed (Gen 22:12).

The intriguing issue in Genesis 32–33 is that Jacob and the future cannot move forward unless both divine and human encounters occur. There is no circumventing the challenge of encounter—a challenge rooted in conflict and fear. But we also know that while there is divine involvement, finally it seems that human conflict and the challenges we face must be resolved in the human sphere. As discussed earlier, Jacob and Esau will, in fact, have to face each other and resolve their dispute before their respective futures will proceed. As we discover in Jacob’s journey, he imagines, anticipates, and plans accordingly, as he understands the future to unfold. But, in fact, the future does not unfold as he imagines. He plans to meet his brother, only to first encounter God; and the importance of this juxtaposition cannot be underestimated. Jacob’s systematically laid-out plans will be interrupted.

As we have witnessed throughout the Abraham narrative, the journey from promise to fulfillment will include at its very core any number of essential interruptions. The very lives of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Rebekah, of Ishmael and Hagar, and of Esau and Jacob will all be interrupted in ways that they could not have imagined. When lives are interrupted, choices are to be made, and these will often determine the direction of the journey.

For Jacob, this new direction will begin with his insistence on having a blessing. He knows the value of a blessing—a blessing that comes in the midst of fear and distrust. Nothing in this encounter is easy or self-evident; so the encounter mirrors, in a way, the journey to hope and fulfillment. What transpires in the divine encounter is a fundamental change in Jacob. While the divine being remains the divine, it is Jacob who is transformed in the continuation of his journey to fulfillment. Change comes not in the manner one prepares, or (for that matter) one intends but often in a moment of extraordinary surprise. Yet, this change, necessary for the future, is not coercive even though it might very well occur in dark and difficult circumstances.

This theme of “darkness to light” certainly permeates Christian belief and fundamental teachings of the church. Thus we might be reminded that there is no path that allows for a journey from Palm Sunday to Easter without the necessary darkness of the intervening days. Good Friday *does not* simply stand in the way; *it is* the way. When Easter thus arrives, it does so with the scars of Good Friday.

The hope of reconciliation and fulfillment for Jacob will be shaped by scars—scars that become an intrinsic part of his identity. What is significant as darkness turns to light is the fact that Jacob even survives. Jacob wrestles with God, and finally when it is all over, he is not the same, and can never be the same, even as the scar remains. Moreover, Jacob's limp ensures that he will forever be recognized by others; he cannot escape and run; and internally out of weakness will come strength. The future is not determined on the basis of wholeness, strength, or perfection.

So the stage is set for the fraternal reconciliation. While the wrestling is critical and while the transformation is essential, both lead to a climatic fulfillment of hope—hope rooted in a face-to-face encounter. But this face-to-face encounter is part of the idea of hope, and no sooner will Jacob meet Esau than we are left to wonder about Jacob's intention. Is he sincere? We are reminded that reconciliation neither erases the scars of brokenness or deception nor paves a future of hope void of such possibilities. Indeed we witness that despite the open arms with which Esau welcomes Jacob, Jacob nonetheless finds it necessary to deceive his brother. Perhaps, finally, while it is true that Jacob will see Esau face-to-face, even here it is clear that only God will know the heart of Jacob.

It is surely the case that the book of 1 John reflects the core of this narrative in understanding the role of reconciliation between humans and God. Jacob's woundedness is evident, even as he journeys to hope and fulfillment. For the first time in his quest for reconciliation, he does not “hedge” his future. If one could call it “sacrifice,” Jacob sacrifices himself for the sake of others for the first time in his journey, and more importantly, Jacob does not sacrifice the future or forge it out of fear and distrust, as he has previously done, and as his father and grandfather before him had.

Facing the “other” as Abraham had discovered, will not come about through disguise, or (for that matter) as Jacob discovered, will come about through a “deputy” or through placing others in front of oneself. What one discovers might very well be surprising, even shocking. Never does it seem to be the case that plans proceed in routine fulfillment. We cast our attention to Luke 15 (Jesus's parable of the two sons), where after making a journey to a faraway place—a

place of dread, of despair, and (finally) of self-discovery—the younger son is humbled to imagine that his father could reach out to him in grace and acceptance. Thus he plans accordingly, only thankfully to discover how very wrong he is.

Like this younger son, Jacob does not know what to expect and thus imagines continued estrangement, but instead he is welcomed and embraced by love. But even more so Esau—as the one cast aside, from whom the blessing is stolen, and whose birthright is negotiated away—runs to meet his brother: Esau “fell on his neck and kissed him and they wept” (Gen 33:4). Why Jacob wept we likely will never know: out of shame? Distrust? As one humbled by love? We do not know, but we know that this encounter is anything but what Jacob expected. Like the younger son of Luke 15, Jacob needed to find himself, to know himself as much as one is able to know oneself, before going home. Meeting, facing, embracing, and kissing Esau is indeed coming home for Jacob, even as he had fled for his life.

Clearly the issue of home is not geographical but existential. Before the future unfolds into the unknown, and the promise is fulfilled, Jacob must come home again. Coming home again becomes an essential component of the journey. But in every case of homecoming, the direction will likely differ. Even as Esau welcomes his brother with open arms, he invites Jacob to journey on side by side, together, but Jacob declines. In fact, he in turn invites Esau to journey ahead; who knows the reasons why? Maybe this invitation to journey ahead is a symbolic gesture on the part of Jacob to have Esau; the older is in front.

We know that the journey is far from a destination that is free of turmoil, but for now there is peace between brothers. What we do know from this narrative and from the recounting of the various experiences is that reconciliation, hope, and fulfillment as they occur in human reality will not eventuate in an easy and straightforward manner. Journeys of hope and fulfillment will have at the very least two essential ingredients, namely, divine and human encounters.

Not infrequently we hear and experience within the church an artificially constructed separation between human and divine relationships. While it is true that they are separate, they are, however, certainly not exclusive of each other; and as we have discovered in this

narrative, there is an intrinsic connection between human and divine relationships. “The Great Commandment,” as Jesus pronounces it, whereby every other commandment stands in its shadow, expresses and accentuates this relationship in its most succinct and sharpest encapsulation: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matt 22:37). Moreover, we know biblically that one cannot come to God’s altar and assume that all is well with God without both facing the “other,” with whom one must reconcile, and even before this, one must look at oneself with the clearest possible vision.

The three episodes explored in this chapter, each in its particular way, magnify the importance of the sometimes-painful journey that must be traveled to hope and fulfillment. In the cases of both Abraham and Jacob (the promise bearers), they seek to circumvent God and to take detours on their journeys; striking is that in both instances, God intervenes in no uncertain way, and they discover that their plans and intentions cannot and indeed must not supersede or circumvent God’s. The fact that there are those set apart for a purpose is in no way an indication that the “other” (even when viewed with suspicion) cannot have a role, even a negotiated role to play. In purchasing a plot of land from Shechem’s father, Jacob will be inextricably connected with the “other” (Gen 33:19). In naming the altar that he erects *El Elohe Israel* (v. 20), Jacob is at least able to make clear that he now knows the architect of his future and hope.