

We continue to look draw from the Book of Genesis. God brings Abram outside and asks him to look at the sky to see if he can count the stars. Typically, we assume this was at night. "Ok, Lord. I got your point. I can't count all the stars." However, a closer reading of the text suggests that it was during the day. At the end of our first reading today, it says, "*When the sun had set and it was dark.*" In other words, God brought Abram out during the day to look at the sky.

Abram looked up at the sky and say, "Lord, I don't see any stars. It is daytime." And the Lord may have replied, "Correct. You don't see them, but you *know* they are there." Once it gets dark, they will appear. Similarly, even though you don't see a son and future descendants now, trust me, they will appear like the stars." We then hear the famous verse "*Abram put his faith in the Lord.*"

Next, we hear what looks like a bizarre ritual with animals that is quite foreign to us. After complaining, "*How am I to know I am to posses [the land]?*" God tells Abram to bring Him **five animals**: three-year heifer, three-year-old goat, three-year old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.

This is an ancient **covenant making ceremony**. In ancient times, parties would make treaties or covenants with each other to establish peace or build families. They would then sacrifice animals and pass through them, which symbolized, "If I don't fulfill this covenant, may I be like these animals."

In the Scripture, God builds His family through covenants. He made covenants with Adam/Eve, Noah, and now with Abram. Typically, He swears an oath (I promise) and then gives some sign to go along with it. In this case, he asks Abram to bring animals that will be sacrificed. They are cut apart. In ancient cultures, you didn't make a covenant, but rather "cut a covenant." Hence, Abram cuts animals in half.

God then puts Abram into a trance or a **deep sleep**. This reminds us of Adam, who was put into a deep sleep before God created Eve. In other words, God is about to do something extraordinary here. He created a covenant with Adam and Eve, now He will do so with Abram.

Next, we hear a **smoking fire pot** and a **flaming torch** passes through the animals that we cut in half. Hence, we have darkness, fire, smoke, and a torch (which gives light).

In the Book of Exodus, we will hear that Mt. Sinai was enveloped in **fire, smoke, and lightening** when Moses was called up the mountain to receive the Law (Ex. 19:16-18). These are symbols of God's presence. By passing through the animals, God says, "May I be like these animals – cut apart - if I don't fulfill the promises I have made to you." Abram can be confident that God will fulfill His promise.

What does this mean for us today? God promised Abram descendants and land. God promised Abram he would protect him and never abandon him. Has God not promised us even more? Jesus promised, "*And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.*" (Matt. 28:20). Additionally, He has promised, "*Amen, Amen, I say to you,*" *Jesus says, "whoever believes has eternal life."* (Jn 6:47) He promised the good thief, "*Today you will be with me in paradise.*" (Lk 23:43) Heaven is the true Promised Land and the Communion of Saints are all the descendants of Abraham.

Like Abram, we complain, "But how do we *know* will be with us? How do we *know* we will possess the land?" How *do you* know? At every Mass, you hear these words, "This is the chalice of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting **covenant**, which will be shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins."

God said, "I will be like these animals if don't fulfill what I promised." Look at happened with Christ in His Passion on the cross. Like the animals, He was cut deeply in his passion, i.e., whipped and scourged. He was then crucified. He *is* the sacrifice. And He is the torch. The light of the world passed through two criminals. He takes the curses of not fulfilling the covenant upon Himself.

At Mass, we participate in the covenant that God makes with us in Christ. Jesus gives Himself to us, and we give ourselves to Him. And in doing so, He will fulfill *all* of the promises He has made to us.

If you ever wonder or doubt that God will be faithful to you, look at a crucifix. A crucifix says, "I am faithful. I never abandon. I have made a covenant with you. Be confident. Trust me. In doing so, you will obtain the true land, the Promised Land, heaven itself."