

A Glimpse of What's to Come  
Genesis 14:8-24, Hebrews 5:4-10  
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights  
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As we get started today, I have a question and a promise. First, the question: how many of you looked at that reading from Genesis and thought, "There's no way that I will ever, ever, sign up to be a lay reader again. That Carver is sadistic!?" Good thing for us that Kristen is a trained professional. I saw a guy get hurt one time trying to read those names. Now, here's the promise: I'll never make you read those names. If I do, you can take 10% off your tithe, no questions asked. I promise.

Wow. What a reading. Can I tell you this? As we are preaching through the book of Genesis, you will not read a stranger chapter in the entire book. This is a curious, curious story. As I thought about Genesis 14, I thought that it might be helpful for us to understand it in light of the five battles that are described within this chapter.

The first battle is described in verses 1-7, which preceded our reading for today. The writer of Genesis is talking about what might be called the original "Axis of Evil." Chedorlaomer of Elam was a sort of an "Attila the Hun" in training, or an "Alexander the Great" wanna-be. At the beginning of this chapter, we read where he creates an alliance that allows him to subdue the lands to the south. For twelve years, these conquered lands pay him tribute, but while he's off vanquishing the tribes to the North, East, and West, the folks from the south decide that their time has come, and they rebel. Bad move. That leads us to

Battle number two, which is where we pick up in verse 8 and following. When the kings of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim, and Bela stand up to fight Chedorlaomer and his allies, it is just ugly. I mean, I thought that some of the softball defeats that the CHUP team suffered a few years ago were bad, but these guys just get pasted by Chedorlaomer and his team. Not only are the armies defeated, but Chedorlaomer is so full of himself that he helps himself to more plunder. The captured booty includes a new resident of the area – a man named Lot, whom we met last week. They all begin to head for Chedorlaomer's home town.

But word reaches Abram, still living in his tent by the oak tree on Mamre's property, that his nephew Lot has been kidnapped. Kristen read for us the account of battle number three: the rescue of Lot. I don't know why this hasn't been made into a Hollywood movie. I can almost see the casting: let's have Sean Connery play the role of Abram, the faith-filled shepherd who would much rather be minding his own business, but once you've messed with family, you're just asking for trouble! And maybe we can get someone like a Jim Carrey to play Lot – a well-meaning but fairly thick young man who can't ever seem to pick a winner. And in this heroic battle scene, the shepherds go up against the professional armies of, oh, let's say Willem Dafoe. And Abram's guys just clean up! These nomadic shepherds go up against the four kings and, I want to tell you, there's not much left to talk about. Abram and his men chase these guys clear up to Damascus and, in the process, rescue Lot and all the other loot that Chedorlaomer and the boys had run off with. Do you see? That's an old-fashioned whuppin' that we see here.

The fourth battle is much more subtle than the previous three. We see in verse 17 that after Abram and his friends put the hurt on Chedorlaomer, they head for home. They're tired, sure, but there's a sense of elation. Maybe even at the post-war press conference, Abram stood up and said, "No one thought we could win this game today, but we came out firing on all cylinders..." Well, you get the picture. They're tired, and they're coming home. And suddenly Abram is surprised by battle number four, which takes place, oddly enough, inside of his heart.

When the armies are heading for home, he's met by two people. The first to be mentioned is the King of Sodom, and the second is the King of Salem, a rather shadowy figure whose name is Melchizidek.

The king of Sodom comes out and offers Abram exactly what nobody offered Abram in our reading from last week. Do you remember that we said that after Abram allowed Lot to choose the better property, nobody came out and said, "Well done, Abe! Congratulations! We want you in our neighborhood. Here's a key to the city!"? Nobody said that, did they? Not then, anyway. But here, the King of Sodom is falling all over himself as he offers Abram that kind of recognition. "Keep all the gold you want, Abram! I'm just glad to be with you. Welcome to Canaan! Have I invited you to the Rotary meeting yet? All the up-and-coming kings are there. You can sit next to me."

But before the King of Sodom can even get through his whole speech, Abram is met by this character named Melchizidek. We don't really know much about him. His name translates as "King of Righteousness", and while the text says that he was a priest of God Most High, the word that is used here (El Elyon) is actually the name that the Canaanites used for the chief god in their worship. Many scholars are of the opinion that Melchizidek was a pagan priest who saw in Abram the power that could only come from the Creator of heaven and earth – God Most High – and so he came to offer Abram...what? A juice box and a couple of fruit roll-ups...and a blessing. Whereas the King of Sodom is offering this homeless nomad a chance at community recognition and appreciation, and asking Abram to measure himself by the people that are around him, Melchizidek is offering Abram the blessing from above and asking him to define himself by the promise that he's received from God. Do you see the battle there? Do you see what each is offering to Abram?

It gets better, because each choice has a financial implication as well. If Abram is to take the offer held forth by the King of Sodom, then he's looking at a huge payday. If he was wealthy before, he'd be filthy rich now! This is just the secure little nest-egg that Abram might need if he's going to take possession of this country as God has promised him.

But Abram passes on the booty and instead, *gives* ten percent of the take to Melchizidek. He is saying, in effect, "Look, the one who blesses me in God's name is the one that I'm going to pay attention to." And after he gives the tithe to Melchizidek, he refuses anything else.

Do you see that battle? Abram had to know that he'd be offending the King of Sodom. I mean, here's the king, saying, "Go ahead, take what you want, friend," and Abram is saying, "I don't want any of this stuff. I know that once I take a nickel from you, you'll lay claim to all of my achievements. Worse – when the promise comes true, you'll think that I got there because of your help. Well look, King, you are on notice. I don't need you so long as I have God's promise."

And here we see a glimpse of what was to come. The Jews who descended from Abram heard this story and they saw in Melchizidek a sign of something greater. Psalm 110, for instance, compares David to Melchizidek. Like Melchizidek, David was king of Salem, or Jerusalem. Like Melchizidek, David was blessed by God and possessed great wealth and authority. Later still, the Jews who followed David looked at him and saw a vision of the Messiah who was to come.

Hundreds of years after that, the early Christians remembered this story of Melchizidek and saw in Melchizidek a glimpse of Jesus. Do you remember the promise that God had made to Abram? He was promised the land, he was promised many descendants, and he was promised that he would be blessed, and in him, all nations would be blessed. And when Abram saw Melchizidek, a Canaanite king and priest come out and bless him in the name of God Most High, Abram sensed that this Melchizidek was a part of the blessing – was, in fact, the blessing with skin on, for Abram and his family. Similarly, the early Christians looked at Jesus and knew that Jesus was not just another man,

but actually God in the flesh. Hebrews chapters 5 – 7 contains a long discussion of how it is that Jesus is a high priest forever in a mysterious, blessing-filled, Melchizedek kind of way.

Now, if you're keeping track, you remember that I promised you five battles, and so far we've only had four: the terror of Chedorlaomer, the defeat of the five kings, Abram's victory over the four kings (including Chedorlaomer), and then this battle for control of Abram's heart and destiny. Where is the fifth battle? It's going on right now. It started when you got out of bed this morning, and will last all day. Most likely, you'll re-enter it tomorrow.

In many ways, battle number four was a glimpse of what was to come, with one very important exception: the characters have changed. Now, it's not Abram at the center. It's you.

And the battle turns on this important question: Who tells you who you are? How do you know who you are?

The King of Sodom – I mean, our culture – will tell you how you know. The culture will tell you. How do you measure your worth? By what you have! By how many girlfriends you've had. By the size of your car, your house, your paycheck. By the number of "friends" you have on your "Myspace.com" account. You are what you have.

And the king of Salem – I mean, the Lord – will tell you that what you believe determines who you are. Who you trust.

Listen: do you believe this about a promise and blessing; do you believe in sin and forgiveness? Do you trust that God has called you and longs to give you a significant ministry as a means of keeping the promise that he made to Abram? And if you believe it, does your life reflect it?

Let me ask that another way. There are people on this street who don't have any heat in their homes. There are families in our city who went to bed hungry last night. There are millions of refugees in Sudan and a dozen other places around the world who lack water and safety and education. Do you really give a damn about those people? Or are you more concerned about the fact that I just said the word "damn" in church than you are about the fact that thousands of the people for whom Jesus died will die in nasty and brutish ways today? Abram rescued Lot! He left his sufficiency and took the risk on behalf of his neighbor. There is a connection between holding on to the promise and seeking the lost; on loving the Lord and serving the neighbor.

Our culture says, "Look, it's about you. I mean, don't get me wrong. If you want to go to church, go to church. Fine. Lots of people find that sort of thing very rewarding. Just don't get too carried away with it, that's all."

And the Lord says, "Don't be fooled. This promise thing? It's going to cost you everything. I will tell you who you are. I promise to do that. Will you believe me?"

It's a battle out there, friends. What we see in Genesis 14 is just a glimpse of what you've got to deal with today. Trust God. Follow Jesus. Love your neighbor. Amen.