

- If you have ever spent time in the desert southwest, you know how much of the region seems *touched by transcendence*. From the pueblos of New Mexico to the canyon lands of Arizona, people for centuries have seen the area as *a holy land*. It's what some call "*a thin place*" – a location where the imagined boundary between the material and the spiritual disappears. It is *a region of profound natural beauty, high thin air, and a history of mystical religion*. For many, the southwest is full of *numinous places* where God feels very near.
- Of course, *God is everywhere*. But there are *sacred places* on this earth where God seems especially present, especially real. For me, *the Grand Canyon forms a natural sanctuary, where Spirit graces –and permeates– everything*. The amazing darkness of Canyon nights reveal more stars than you ever thought could exist. And Canyon sunrises illumine an immense range of textures and subtle colors splayed over peaks and gorges. The Psalmist's words come to mind: "*The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows forth his handiwork.*"<sup>1</sup> The Canyon rim provides an evocative place to pray the Daily Office – perfect for the words of the Venite: "*In his hand are the caverns of the earth, and the heights of the hills are his also. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands have molded the dry land. Come, let us bow down... before the Lord our Maker.*"<sup>2</sup>
- Our Genesis reading today prompts me to think of places like the Grand Canyon, in relation to the covenant God makes with *Abram*. Not yet named Abraham, he *has been called from his homeland, and has just arrived in the new region God has promised him. It is night. And Abram is in a tent, out in the midst of a spiritually-charged wilderness*. Two of James Tissot's Abram paintings depict this.<sup>3</sup> With them, we can imagine how the enfolding darkness heightens Abram's sensitivity to what is around him – the voices of nocturnal animals and birds; the gentle stirring of a breeze through the scrub oaks; and the sound of a twig brushing up against the side of the tent.

God comes to him in a vision, and speaks to him in an audible voice: "*Do not be afraid, Abram, I am giving you a great reward.*" Abram does not seem to notice that *God's nearness, God's self-revelation, is itself the great gift!* Instead, his mind leaps from *presence* to *absence*. Like we so often do, *he focuses on what is not, rather than on what is.* Yet, *God is right there before him!* The Lord says to him, "*I am here*, and I will *provide* for you!"

- Though God has made *three* profound promises to him, Abram dwells on just *one* of them. *The thing he wants most of all, he is afraid he'll never get – a son, and descendants to follow.* So God calls Abram out of the tent, and gently challenges him. He tells him to look up into the dark sky, filled with a myriad of bright lights. "*Count the stars if you can,*" says God. "*For as many stars as there are in the sky – that is how many descendants you will have.*"
- God then tells Abram to fetch several animals and birds, *for sacrifice in a mysterious rite.* Abram obtains the birds and animals during the coming day, and he appears to know what God intends to do with them. Late that afternoon, *Abram cuts the animals in half, placing them on either side of a pathway.* Of course, the carcasses of the animals attract the attention of carrion birds, as we see in James Tissot's second painting. But Abram drives them away.
- Just as the sun is setting, *with darkness returning*, deep sleep falls upon Abram. As Genesis tells us, his mystical trance from the prior night returns, granting him another vision of God. *Under the great expanse of the sparkling stars above, he sees something astonishing: a fire-pot billowing with smoke, and a flaming torch!* The pot and the torch then pass *between the halves* of the carcasses that flank either side of the path. *In this moment, the LORD makes "a covenant with Abram,* saying, 'To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.'

- This dramatic scene, played out at night in the wilderness, among rocks, trees and wild animals, may seem a curiosity. But *we need to 'read' the imagery within text*, and notice important parallels with other stories in salvation history. *God makes a covenant with Abram*. In the process, *God declares a solemn and binding promise!* Though Abram has already received the Lord's promises, *God now enacts these promises in a cultic rite*. This cultic rite prefigures the making of the Exodus Covenant, as well as the New Covenant in Jesus' blood and death. *Nothing indicates that this covenant with Abram is conditional – the words "if" or "unless" do not appear in God's words to him*. Abram *believes* God's promise, about how his descendants will be as numerous as the stars. *God then reckons his believing as righteousness* – the very point that Paul later picks up when writing to the Romans.<sup>4</sup>
- Archaeological evidence from the ancient world suggests how kings of rival nations made *similar covenants* among themselves. In concluding a peace agreement with another king, one of them would cut an animal in half and put each piece on either side of a pathway. Then, with fire and incense, the king would walk between the pieces. By doing so, *he conveyed a message: 'if I fail to be honest or sincere in the promise I make to you today, may I be cut into two, and burned up with fire – just like this animal here!'* *For God to adopt this same way of making a covenant with Abram, is profound*. God promises, in a way that Abram *can not yet understand*, the greatest degree of personal sincerity, even at the cost of 'self-sacrifice'! *In effect, God says, "I, the Lord your God, promise, to you and your descendants, to be faithful, even at the cost of my own being."* This message does not quite make sense *until we see the one called 'God's son' offer himself*, willingly, *for sacrifice*.
- What we find in this story is *an ancient cultic liturgy*. Like all liturgy, it *operates in an intuitive way*. In liturgy, the meaning of actions and symbols is not immediately evident, or rationally accessible. We should no more

expect this Genesis story to *make sense* than we expect the Eucharist to 'make sense,' or have transparent meaning. Both liturgies operate at a primal level, and neither are amenable to quick explanation. Therefore, *we need to allow this ancient cultic rite, and our Eucharistic practice, to 'soak into' our imagination.*

- *It will help us greatly if we let both rites inhabit our background reflection, and be part of our dreams.* We can imagine ourselves *in Abram's place!* We can imagine God calling us out of our tents in darkness, and inviting us to look up at *the glorious reflection of the Creator's grace and power.* As we do, we open ourselves to God's promises, promises that *even now* are *being kept.* *This is 'holy imagining.'* Through this kind of holy imagining, we begin to see *the deeper meaning of our God.* *For God has made profound and lasting promises ~ promises so deep and abiding, that the 'suffering servant' offered himself in sacrifice to prove them.* God may not seem immediate, and God's ways may be hard to explain. But *God is always near; God is always with us.* *We know that God is present in mystery, and within ancient liturgies.*





James Tissot, God's Three Covenants With Abram





**Luke 13:31-35**

Some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

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Notes:

<sup>1</sup> See the beginning of Psalm 19.

<sup>2</sup> This portion of Psalm 95 can be found in the traditionally used Invitatory canticle, *Venite*, in BCP:82.

<sup>3</sup> Tissot's three paintings capture moments from the three occasions when God reveals self to Abram, and makes a covenant with him and his posterity; see Genesis chapters 12, 15, and 17.

<sup>4</sup> See Romans 4.