

Blessings Anyway

“The God of Abraham praise.” We began our Lenten journey last week with Adam and Eve; this week, we take a mighty jump of ten chapters in the Book of Genesis. If last week’s Scripture reading was a sort of “Just So Story,” an origin myth told to explicate deep truths about the human condition in the fanciful setting of talking beasts and paradisiacal conditions, then this week’s Old Testament reading falls more into the category of legend; that is, an important story from history which interprets and embellishes the likely facts of the matter with further metaphor. I’ll touch on that in a minute before I turn to the real meat of what I’ve been thinking and praying about this week. The story of Abraham was and is important to three of humankind’s major religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Our New Testament reading this morning shows how Paul wrote to establish his bona fides with a group of Christians who did not know him and, in doing so, helped them to see their own connection with the Salvation History of Israel and how the promise made by God to Abram was being fulfilled in the Good News from Jesus for the whole world.

For those who weren’t with us last week or who have let the cares and busy-ness of the week expunge the brilliance of my oratory, a quick recap. Whether or not we can accept the story of the first humans in the Garden of Eden as being factual (and the talking snake makes that difficult), those who included this ancient story in the canon of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures saw the value of the metaphorical truths it teaches. All of us eventually come to that point in our lives when we see a clear choice between what is right and what is wrong and choose that which is wrong. We surround our choice with alibis and reasons and self-justification. When confronted, we will often offer up a scapegoat, as well. And in this process of pretending to be blameless when we are not, a dreadful thing happens. We come to realize that we are not always on the side of the angels, indeed that there is now a great yawning chasm between us and the Creator. We may ask why God has abandoned us but in fact it is we who have turned our backs on God. In seeking to know by experience the difference between good and evil, we bring death into the world of our personhood because separation from God is the ultimate death.

The history of God’s loving relationship with humankind begins metaphorically in the Garden and for us each individually with that realization of separation, the knowledge that our thoughts are not God’s thoughts, our ways not God’s ways. The rest of the story, the remainder of our Scriptures, Old Testament, Apocrypha, and New Testament alike, are the story of how God seeks to restore the relationship between God’s self and God’s creation. Many scholars see a turning point just where we began this morning in Genesis 12. The first 11 chapters of Genesis are of a piece with the creation stories of the first two chapters. They are origin myths in which the factuality of a story is far, far less important than the general lessons it teaches about the human heart. Cain and Abel, Lamech and Enoch and Methuselah, Noah and his ark are all mythic stories about why things are the way they are. And while we may delight in the stories, their lessons about jealousy, rage, vengeance, and the broken nature of creation are the real take-away from these ancient tales.

But with Abram, later known as Abraham, we encounter the first “real” character in the Bible. He is not a cardboard cut-out, useful only for his place in a story, but a complex, three-dimensional character, whose doubts and decisions we can connect with. There are aspects of the Abraham story that seem as if they’ve been tacked on. It’s unlikely, for example, that he

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twice allowed Sarah to be taken off to a king's harem to save his own neck, especially given what we know about Sarah and especially since the exact same story is told about their son, Isaac. It's a little like the story of George Washington and the cherry tree – apocryphal but revelatory of the man's character. But we identify with Abraham as he struggles to ascertain what it is God wants from him and his life, as he wonders if he's really trusted the right deity, as he argues with God. Abraham sometimes lives his life heroically, sometimes as an abject coward. But overall, he exhibits the one trait that earns him the name "Friend of God" – he trusts God.

I'm always impressed with the way Abram trusts God in this very first story about him. We live today in a highly mobile society, unlike any other society in the history of the world. Today, a huge percentage of people think nothing of picking up and moving, whether it be across the state, across the country, or around the world. As many of you know, when I was a child, my father moved my family from one end of the St. Louis metropolitan area to the other, then to the Gulf Coast of Florida, then to two widely separated villages in England, then to Long Island, and finally, back to St. Louis. I've not slowed down much since then. Connie calculated once that we've moved a total of over 12,500 miles since we've been married. I know a little something about moving a family around and I know that at least some of you all do as well. It's tough, isn't it? You've got to adjust to new jobs, new domiciles. You've got to find new schools for the kids, a new place to worship, new doctors and dentists. The grocery stores may not carry the things you like; your kids' favorite restaurant chain may be unknown. You've got to get used to new neighbors, whose customs may seem strange. They may not speak the same language as you, even if they do call it English. (You laugh, but remember the famous aphorism of George Bernard Shaw, who declared Britain and America to be two countries divided by a common language. You don't really have to go that far afield, either. Try getting a Yankee from Maine together with a Belle from Georgia and see what kind of confusion arises.)

If that all seems daunting, consider the situation of Abram's day, some 4000 years ago. Anything further from your home than a day or two of travel (and remember, we're talking travel on foot) was completely unknown. Those brave souls who made their living traveling the trade routes guarded their secrets carefully. There was no reliable source of information about who or what you might find once you left your own place, no way to learn the language on the other side of the fertile crescent. Moving your family 1000 miles away took courage and, most importantly, doing it on the say so of God took faith. Abram believed that Yahweh could make good on Yahweh's promise, so he moved. Later, when Abram and his wife Sarai had long since passed the age they could expect to become parents with no offspring, he believed that Yahweh could still make him the father of a nation. Genesis 15:6 tells us that Yahweh counted Abram's faith as righteousness, "And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness."

Paul quotes that verse in our passage in Romans. It's been a while since I preached from Romans, so it may be worthwhile to review the basic facts of that letter. From what we can tell from the clues in the letter itself and from what we know of Paul's ministry from Luke's account in Acts, Paul wrote his letter to the church in Rome around A.D. 55, from Corinth. Paul was coming to the end of a long missionary journey and he knew he was at a crossroads. His mission to the Gentiles had taken him all throughout Asia Minor and a good portion of Greece. Now, he

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wanted push further west, taking the Gospel to what was then considered to be “the ends of the earth,” Spain. Before he could set out, he had to do two things. First, he had to fulfill his promise to the leaders of the church in Jerusalem and deliver the money he had collected for the poor of their community. Second, he had to do something familiar to every foreign missionary who was to come after him. He had to raise support.

Paul intended for Rome to be his base of operations for his western campaign. He had wanted to visit the church there for some time, but a visit to the believers in the Imperial City was not an end unto itself. Paul, not unnaturally, saw Rome as the key to evangelizing Europe. He would almost surely need to gather some money in Rome. More importantly, he must have wanted personal support, connections to Roman citizens along his route to ease his transition into new communities. To fulfill either of these goals, he needed to ensure that he would get an open, if not warm, welcome from the believers in Rome.

But Paul had a problem. He'd made a lot of enemies in his rather tumultuous life. Some Christians had not forgotten that he had been their sworn and deadly enemy just a few years before. Likewise, many Jews considered him a traitor. His conviction that Christ had ordained him “Apostle to the Gentiles” only made matters worse. Jews and Jewish Christians alike found his dismissal of circumcision and other points of the Law of Moses in accommodation of Gentiles to be blasphemous. Paul may have reached agreement on these matters with James the Just, Peter and John, but their sway over other Christians was not absolute and over adherents to the Old Covenant, of course, it was non-existent. So throughout Paul's journeys, he'd contended with both brethren of his old religion and those of his new faith. To get a fair hearing with the church in Rome, he was going to have to give straight answers to the charges that had been lodged against him.

And so, he wrote a letter, which apparently did the trick. Although Paul ended up making the journey to Rome in chains, he had two years of productive ministry in the capital, as Luke tells us in Acts. Tradition goes on to relate that Paul was finally able to make that journey to Spain, only to finally fall prey to Nero's persecution of Christians upon his return to Rome. Not only did his letter convince the Romans, but it was widely circulated amongst the churches (perhaps by Paul himself) and, when the New Testament took its final form, was given pride of place as first among Paul's writings, for its comprehensive scope as well as for its length.

With that in mind, and particularly Paul's defense of his stance that neither circumcision nor adherence to Torah can heal our relationship to God, let's turn to his thoughts on Abraham. The point, Paul says, is that Abraham was deemed righteous by God before God called on Abraham to circumcise himself and his male children. It happened long before Yahweh gave the Law to Moses at Sinai. Rabbinic tradition at the time of Paul held that Abraham knew the law in advance but Paul says this is not so. The Scripture tells us that the Lord counted Abraham's faith as righteousness, not his scrupulous observance of a Law that did not yet exist. Paul stands firm on the primacy of the Scripture over religious tradition, which I guess makes him a good Protestant. As an uncircumcised man, without the Law, who found ultimate favor in the sight of God, Abraham is truly father of both Jews and Gentiles. He is proof that saving faith in God is not reserved to his descendants who live under the Law of Moses.

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Paul also points out that Abraham's faith, quite illogically, was in God as a giver of life. For reproductive purposes, the bodies of Abraham and Sarah were dead but Abraham believed God's promise that they would be parents. Abraham believed in a sort of resurrection, a renewed and productive life after a demonstrable death. In this, too, Abraham is the father of both Jews and Gentiles who believe in God's power of resurrection. Since God counted Abraham's resurrection faith to be righteousness, without recourse to the Law, then surely God will also extend mercy and justification to those who trust that Jesus' resurrection is God's promise for us all.

Abraham's willingness to trust God in carrying out what must have seemed like a capricious order to move as well as his trust that God would indeed bring life to a pair of reproductively dead bodies is the opposite of Adam and Eve's failure to abide by God's prohibition of the fruit of the tree of knowledge as well as their disbelief that the prohibited action would bring death. Abraham's trust of God was fulfilled – his descendants are today like the stars of the sky in number and continue, both Arab and Jew, to live in the land of promise although sadly still without true shalom.

We should take heart from the story of Abraham, as Paul intends. Abraham, the Friend of God, was far from perfect. I mentioned the stories of his abandonment of Sarah but there is also his momentary failure of trust in God to provide an heir. His siring of Ishmael upon Sarah's Egyptian handmaid, Hagar, legendarily resulted in the age-old conflict between the descendants of Ishmael, the Arabs, and the children of Isaac, the Jews. And yet, his trust in God was credited to him as righteousness. God blessed him anyway.

And God continues to shower blessings on us anyway, those of us who trust in God to be present with us, in good times and in bad, those of us who trust God to give life to us even though we are mired in spiritual death, separated from God by our own choices. God blesses us anyway, those of us who trust God enough to engage our souls in relationship with our Loving Creator. My friend Rev. Steven Greenebaum, himself a descendant of Abraham in the flesh, reminded me that Abraham argued with God, even as his grandson wrestled with God – a trait I continually recommend to all who would be included in the extension of Israel known as the Church. We may pluck the apple, we may sin against those who love us, but God calls us to remain in relationship with God, to argue and wrestle and to trust. We do not earn God's love for us. It is freely given.

And so, we praise the God of Abraham, the One for whom we look with hope to the hills, the One who watches over us day and night. We lift up our thanks to God who has been our help for ages past and is our hope for years to come. We give thanks to God for God's amazing grace, how sweet the sound, the unconditional love that seeks us out when we are lost and brings us home in the path of our brother and Savior, Jesus. For that love, that grace, that new life from death, thanks be to God.