

The Journey of Faith

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-19

*Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself,
“Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old?
Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?”*

Mark 8:31-38

*For those who want to save their life will lose it,
and those who lose their life for my sake,
and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.*

Our readings for today are about, among other things, the challenge of being open to the new and different ways God works. Abram is an old man when he is called to be part of something new God is doing. His wife, who is ninety herself, is to become the mother of yet another child. Jesus, the messiah of God, who was expected to displace the kingdoms of human creation with God’s just and peaceful kingdom, talks about going through suffering, rejection, and death, and then some kind of new life. No wonder Abraham laughed. No wonder Peter got upset. How can a man and woman who are great grandparent age have another child? How can someone who is supposed to inaugurate the new age of God’s kingdom accomplish anything through suffering, defeat, and death?

Always a New Journey

Abram is ninety-nine years old when God offers partnership in a new venture, a covenant with God that will bring blessings to coming generations. He gets a new name. Abram, “mighty ancestor,” becomes Abraham, “father of nations.” Notice the shift from the past to the future. Isn’t Abram way too old for such foolishness? He should be enjoying the few years he has left. When he was seventy-five, God had called him to leave his home and relatives and go to some unknown land. Wasn’t that enough? Wouldn’t Abraham now be thinking: God is asking way too much. Give me a break. I’ve done my bit.

Then God tells Abraham that Sarai is going to have a new name—Sarah. And she will have a child. Abraham falls on the floor laughing. No way can he and Sarai have another child at their age! So God says that the child’s name will be Isaac, which means “laughter.” I think God wants Abraham and Sarah, who later also laughs at the idea, to remember their disbelief and how bound they were by conventional thinking, how limited was their vision.

How easily we get become immersed in conventional thinking! When you are young, you have energy and ideals and spunk. That is the time to try new things and to be open to possibilities. But as we get older, it’s time to settle down, physically and spiritually. Fall into our comfortable routines. Rest from the labors of our younger years. We take on a “been there, done that” mentality. It’s just too much trouble to think new thoughts or go off on wild goose chases.

But with God there is no such thing as the habitual. Anything can happen at any time. To be people who are spiritually open to God, who are willing to go to that deeper level of the life of the spirit and not the calendar or clock, life can break forth into adventure and newness at any time. And we need to be ready to go with it. That’s faith. That’s what Abraham finally did. He finally said: Okay, God, here we go, one more time.

Faith is taking God at God’s word, getting over our incredulosity, and moving out into this new thing God is doing. There’s no pattern. There’s no roadmap. There’s no neatly laid out program for spiritual advancement or religious accomplishment. The life of faith, or the spiritual life, means paying attention all the time, being as open as we can be to the movements of God’s spirit in our lives and that voice within us calling us to be who God made us to be and do the things God is giving us to do. Faith means living a life that is open to the present moment, not clinging to the past, sensitive to the movements of God’s spirit, and then going with it.

The Journey of Not-Clinging

What about Jesus? He tells the disciples that the Son of Man has to go through suffering and be rejected by the religious establishment and be killed. After three days he will rise again. Peter can't hear all of this. To him it's crazy talk. Peter had signed up for what he was sure would be a cruise to victory, a successful religious movement that would sweep away the oppressive political and religious powers. That's what the messiah was supposed to do, bring in a new day, a new rule, throwing out the old guard.

Now Jesus is talking about the way of suffering and rejection and death, not grabbing power or gaining status. I think Peter totally missed the part about Jesus rising from death—went right over his head. He was too stunned by the suffering and rejection bit. So he takes Jesus aside: “Uh, Jesus, could we talk about this?” I think he is being very patronizing, as though Jesus has suddenly become feeble or delusional or something. This is not the way a real messiah is supposed to act. Peter gets a harsh reprimand from Jesus, not in private but right in front of the other disciples. Jesus calls him Satan, one who tries to distract folks from God's ways. Tells him to get out of the way. You are thinking in human terms, not God's. You still have the old mind, not the new mind.

Jesus then turns to the disciples and the crowd, and, we might say, to us: If you want to follow me, you have to deny yourself, take up your own cross and follow me in the way I am going, not the ways you think are going to bring success. If you want to save your life, if you try to hang onto your life and grasp your life, you will lose it. You have to let go. You have to give yourself for my sake and the sake of the good news of God's kingdom, God's order of things. If you spend your efforts trying to gain the world, pad your nest, build up equity, protect your assets, you will lose your very life, the essence of who you are. If you try to build the kingdom of God the way you think it should be, it's not God's kingdom you are building, but your own ego. Paul later spoke of this same kind of thing as dying and rising with Jesus. The kind of life to which God calls us involves the death of the old self, the self preoccupied with itself, and putting on the new self, the true self, the personhood God created.

In last week's gospel reading, Jesus, after his baptism, proclaimed the dawn of God's kingdom and called people to repent and be part of it. Peter has not yet gone through repentance, that change of mind, of thinking. Repentance literally means “beyond mind” [*metanoia*—*meta*(beyond), *nous* (mind)]. It means to go beyond the old ways of thinking, to get a new mind, a new way of thinking that is open to God's spirit and leading and will. And yet it is really our truest mind, the one we have lost along the way. It is the mind of openness, wonder, and imagining, the mind of humility and seeking. It is the mind of the child, what Jesus meant, I think, when he said that unless we become like a child, we cannot enter God's kingdom, life as God meant it to be. To follow Jesus is to quit hanging onto fixed ideas of the way things ought to be and ought to go. It is to let go of the ideas of success and failure, strength and weakness we have been fed from childhood. And it is to let go of the clinging to things we think bring us security, but in reality only fill our lives with anxiety and fear and defensiveness.

It all comes back to the meaning of faith, faith as trustful, open living. Faith is seeing with our hearts more than our eyes, trusting the spiritual center of ourselves—call it the soul, or spirit, or whatever—as we grow in our sensitivity to God's presence and leading. Finally, Jesus put it so succinctly. Fullness of life, life as it is meant to be lived, is found not by hanging onto our lives but by letting go. That is what Jesus was talking about. It is not by fiercely hanging onto life that we find life but by learning what it means to let go, to live with open hands, open minds, and open hearts.

The inward journey work that we do—prayer, silence, reflection, self-understanding, study, and so forth—is so that we can notice in ourselves where we are clinging and hanging on, where we are fearful and holding back, where we are not open but shut down. And this is not in order to beat ourselves up about it, but to then be able to learn how to let go, to be more open, to be more awake to the movements of God's spirit and the sound of God's voice. Our inward journey is the on-going process of repentance, of coming back to our true mind and our true life of living as God's thankful, joyful, servant people.