

March 4, 2012 / Second Sunday in Lent / David L. Edwards

The Journey of Faith: Staying Open, Letting Go

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-17

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.*

The life of faith includes being and remaining open to the new and different ways God works, each day and at each stage in our lives. That is what the inward journey is about, giving attention to our lives so that we see where God might be calling us and where we might be closed to the fresh winds of God's spirit. Related to that is learning to let go. Letting go of our habitual or preconceived ideas of who God is or how God works. Also being able to let go of our notions about success, power, security, achievement, or what constitutes a meaningful life.

Always a New Journey

With the life of faith, the journey is always new. Abram is ninety-nine years old when he experiences God's renewing of a partnership, a covenant 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 what is happening in the present toward the future. There will be no revered portrait hung in the church hallway with a little plaque: "Abram: Our Mighty Ancestor". Something is happening now. Abram is becoming Abraham, one through whom God is doing a new thing.

Isn't Abram way too old for such foolishness? He should be enjoying the few years he has left. After all, when he was seventy-five, God had called him to leave his ancestral home, pack up his family and belongings, and go to some unknown land (Gen. 12:1-4).

Wasn't that enough?

The thing is, Abram, now Abraham, just falls on his face in God's presence, a sign of reverence and obedience. He simply goes on to do the thing God calls him to do. No struggle, no protest, no hemming and hawing. Abraham hears the call and promise, and follows. The point is not that Abraham is some kind of super hero who does not struggle with these things like the rest of us. I think the point is that the life of faith IS possible. It is possible for us to live from the inside out, according to the movements of God's spirit in our lives, no matter what our age or circumstances in life.

Don Morrison stood here back before Christmas and sounded the call for a new mission, the growing of good food on this property, to be shared with people served by ministries that have grown out of this church community and others. He is joined by Curtis Harper. Neither of those guys is a spring chicken! There is a huge difference when we live our lives by the inward movements of God's spirit rather than letting the outward circumstances of our lives—age, physical condition, past experiences, material resources—determine our attitudes and actions. When we are daily attending to our lives in relationship to God through what we call the inward journey, our lives become one loving, caring, and giving adventure after another.

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! At their age?! So God says that the child's name will be Isaac, which means "laughter." I think God did this as a gentle reminder, so that later on Abraham and Sarah would remember how God's power of new life overcame their disbelief and how bound they were by conventional thinking.

How easily we get programmed by conventional thinking, not just by society but the church as well! When you are young, you have energy and ideals and spunk. We are eager to try new things and are wide open to possibilities. But as we get older, conventional thinking tells us it is time to settle down, physically and spiritually. Your body lets you know you can't do the things you used to do. Then there are illnesses, and the shadow of death falls over you. It just feels better to drift into comfortable routines, rest from your labors, and adopt a "been there, done that" mentality. It's just too much trouble to think new thoughts or go off on wild goose chases.

With God, the very Power of life, there is no such thing as the habitual, the conventional. 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. I think he finally said: Okay, God, here we go, one more time.

Faith is taking God at God's word, and moving out into this new thing God is doing. There's no pattern. There's no road map. 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 now, and then going with it. This is a form of non-clinging, and that is where we go with the story from Mark's gospel.

The Journey of Not-Clinging

Jesus has started talking publicly about the Son of Man having to go through suffering, being rejected by the politico-religious establishment, and then getting killed. After three days he will rise again. To Peter this is crazy talk. He had signed up for what he was sure would be a successful religious movement that would sweep away the oppressive political and religious powers. That's what God's messiah was supposed to do, bring in a new day, throw out the old guard.

Jesus, however, is talking about the way of suffering and rejection and death, not grabbing power or gaining status, not founding a powerful new political party or religion. I think the bit about rising from death simply went right over Peter's head. He was too stunned and embarrassed by the suffering and rejection business. So he takes Jesus aside, the way you do when you think somebody is making a fool out of themselves. "Uh, Jesus, could we talk about this?" Peter thinks he needs to "school" Jesus on how a real messiah is supposed to act.

Jesus' reprimand is swift and harsh. It is not private, but in front of the other disciples. Jesus calls Peter Satan, one who tries to distract people from the ways of God. He 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.

Then Jesus turns to the disciples and the crowd...and to us: If you want to follow me, you have to deny (let go of) yourself, take up your own cross (of faithfulness to God), 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. The tighter you try to hold onto it, the more it will slip through your fingers. 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. The apostle Paul later wrote about this as dying and rising with Jesus. It is the dying of the old self, the self preoccupied with itself, and putting on the new self, the true, God-created self.

Everything Jesus taught had to do with having new minds, a whole different way of thinking and seeing, and therefore living. In last week's gospel reading, Jesus comes away from his baptism preaching and teaching the dawn of God's kingdom, calling people to repent and be part of it. Peter has not yet gone through repentance, that change of mind. 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 mind that is open to God's spirit and leading and will. And yet it is our truest mind, the one we were created with, but 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 when he said that unless we become like a young 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 notions of success and failure, strength and weakness we have been fed from childhood and which cause us so much misery. What is true for us as individuals is true for us as communities of faith and church structures. When we begin to focus on preserving ourselves, or becoming big and strong and influential, that is the moment of our spiritual death, and eventually death in fact. The only way is trustful living, doing what we feel God calls us to do, letting go of ourselves, opening up to the leading of God's spirit.

It all comes back to the meaning of faith. Faith is not about believing things or ideas or doctrines. Faith means 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. Fullness of life, life as it is meant to be lived, is found not by hanging onto but by letting go, and living with open hands, minds, and hearts. I think that is what was going on with Abraham and Sarah. I think that is what Jesus was talking about.