

February 24, 2013 / Second Sunday of Lent / David L. Edwards

### Trust and Confidence: The Journey of Faith

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

*And [Abram] believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.*

Luke 13:31-35

*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....'"*

Abram, like other characters in the Bible, serves as a model for living one's life as a journey of faith. The core theme of scripture is God's call and our response in faithful living. In scripture, faith does not mean believing in religious ideas or doctrines. Neither is faith an intellectual leap of some kind. Faith is about experience, finding within our concrete, daily living the presence of God and the power of God's love. Faith is about discovering and living the true ways of being human as God created us to be. Faith is about discerning and embracing who God has created us to be and what God has gifted us to contribute to the whole of life. The journey of faith calls us to live trustfully, that is, to be open and at ease without answers, or always having to know where we are going. It necessitates paying attention in each moment, each step along the way, which is the work of the spiritual life. We see these things in the story for today.

Abram has been called to this journey of faith. He has packed up his family and left his homeland, and we might say that he is learning that the journey itself is his new home. It is the journey of his relationship with God. All Abram has is the promise of God, that he is being led to a land that he will possess, a land that God will show him. There is also the promise of generations of descendants.

The word of God comes to Abram in a dream. Dreams and dreamlike states play a prominent role in these stories. They are symbols that the life of faith comes from the deepest part of us, our true center, you might say. It is God speaking to us beneath the noisy, delusional surface of life, all the attractive yet empty distractions from what matters most. This is why in our community we emphasize the importance of practicing silence, of recognizing and letting go of our attachments to the outward and inward noises. Then we can be inwardly quiet enough to listen to that deeper, truer voice of what life, and our own life,

is really about.

First of all, God speaks words we hear throughout scripture: *Do not be afraid. I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.* Throughout Jewish and Christian scriptures, we hear this voice telling us not to be afraid, to be at peace. As we let ourselves be unafraid and at peace, we renew our awareness of God's care and the abundance of life. If we are working faithfully with daily times of quieting ourselves, outwardly and inwardly, and growing in our ability to detach from those outward and inward noises and voices, we will experience in increasing measure this peace, this sense of ultimate security, and the awareness of blessing, of abundance.

Our story is about a moment when Abram loses confidence in this life to which he has been called. How can you bless me when I am childless? Abram has a servant Eliezer, who perhaps is steward of his household, but he has no child as legal heir. Abram repeats his complaint, with just a hint that maybe he is blaming God for not giving him his own child.

God takes Abram outside under the night sky, another image of the deep mystery of God's presence and workings. See those uncountable stars? Your descendants will be just as many. Abram believes this, and God "reckons it to him as righteousness". This is a difficult phrase. The best I can express it is that God sees that Abram once again believes the promise intensely, enough to direct his life toward it. Believing is very close to the meaning of faith at this point. It is living trustfully with our whole being.

Abram is also uneasy about the other part of the promise, the possession of this new land. How will I know that I will possess it? We find ourselves in Abram. We want to KNOW, to have answers, to have guarantees.

God directs Abram to offer a sacrifice of various animals, cutting them in half, except for the birds, and placing the carcasses on the ground. Let's not get hung up on what is to us the repugnant practice of animal sacrifice. We need to listen for the meaning of this ancient story. Abram goes into a deep sleep, and a "deep and terrifying darkness" falls upon him. This is a very dramatic picture of the mystery of God and God's workings. A smoking pot and a flaming torch pass between the pieces. The covenant, the relationship between God and Abram, is renewed in this ceremony. Abram continues on the journey. God has extended the covenant once again, offered it freely and completely to Abram.

The Abram story shows the essential nature of the journey we are on as people of faith. It is a life of trustful living, a willingness to live without answers, without being sure exactly where we are going. It is also a life of letting go, of dropping our attachments, including our attachments to our doubts and fears, so that we keep open to God's presence

and leading, God's offer of new life, in each moment. This calls for paying attention, which is what the spiritual life is about.

Along the way, we gain deeper insight into what it means to trust God's promise of care and abundance. It is not a care that removes difficulties, but upholds us within and through them. It is not material abundance, but a life full of meaning, joy, and gratitude, of coming to see that we have everything we need, and of finding our place within the whole expanse and fabric of the creation. Along the way, we have moments of insecurity about it all, and we lose confidence. How are you going to do this, God? How do I know it is going to happen? Where are we going to find the money or other resources to bring about this mission you have called us to? Is this a wild goose chase?! Notice that God shows Abram the stars and leads him through a ceremony. These are really just re-statements of the promise. Still no assurances, no guarantees. Abram hears again the promise. Do not be afraid. I am with you. Your reward will be great. He continues on the journey.

In Indianapolis last Sunday, I worshiped with my family at a Disciples of Christ congregation on the west side. Just before Christmas, they lost their sanctuary to a devastating fire. They have been worshiping in the fellowship hall of a neighbor church. When my sister Sylvia talked with me soon after the fire, I sensed she was taking it quite well and in stride, so I risked sharing a teaching from Buddhism that seemed to fit. It goes like this: *Someone burned down my hut; now I have an unobstructed view of the moon.* She liked that, and the congregation has been discovering the truth of that little saying. Instead of leaving everything, like Abram, they lost what felt like everything. Their hut, or sanctuary, did burn down. Their journey since has been one of growing closer as a community, realizing what is and what is not really important, and receiving some surprising help along the way. An announcement was made that morning that the Week of Compassion, the Disciples relief and recovery fund, had given the congregation the amount of its insurance deductible. That was help they never expected. They have been experiencing the life of faith in a fresh, new way. They have an unobstructed view of the moon!

The week before that, I was on retreat at the Sisters of Loretto motherhouse in Kentucky. I had a lengthy conversation with a long time friend Elaine Marie Prevallet, a contemplative and writer. We talked about how our two communities are both "vowed communities" in their different ways. That is, membership means committing to and working with certain spiritual practices. Elaine shared that people come to Loretto, experience somewhat the community's life, and they say, "You all are really DOING it!" What they mean, I suppose, is that here is a community of women committed to making their lives expressions of

God's love. Elaine laughed and said she wants to ask those people, Can you please tell me what "it" is so we will know?! I have had similar experiences at times when people come to our community and see a little bit of who we are, or are trying to be. It is very hard to express what "it" is! This has to do with the mystery of God's presence and spirit, and the hard-to-explain experience of shaping your life around that sacred center. "It", this reality of and relationship with God, this journey of faith, is something we only know as we do it. Yet this is the way we were created to live, in openness and trust. It is a life lived around the mystery of God's presence and leading.

I want to say a brief word about the story from Luke's gospel. It speaks of an important, and related, dimension of the life of faith, one we don't talk about as much as I think we need to. It is about confidence. There is confidence in the journey of faith. Not the confidence that comes from having answers, or thinking we do. Not the confidence of knowing what's ahead, what's going to happen. And not the confidence from having our lives go according to some plan we have made up for ourselves, even a "spiritual" plan. It is the confidence of being rooted in God, knowing ourselves loved unconditionally and eternally. It is the confidence that comes from discerning and living out of what we feel God calls us to do, and from exercising the gifts God has given us.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem for what will be the last week of his life. Some Pharisees warn him that Herod wants to kill him. Herod is a kind of mixed breed character who has been appointed by Rome "king of the Jews", to maintain control over the people. To Herod, Jesus is a threat. To Jesus, Herod is no threat.

Jesus' response is delightful. Look, he says, go and tell that fox something. I am going to keep doing what I am doing, today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will finish my work. That last bit is a reference to his crucifixion and resurrection. He then says that he must be "on his way". This is a familiar phrase in Luke's gospel. The "way" of Jesus is his journey of faith, and it becomes the "way" for those who follow him. Neither Herod nor Rome itself can stand in the way of this "way".

Jesus knows who he is and he knows whose he is. It is a confidence that holds up in the face of all the distractions, illusions, and dead-end ways of life. It is a confidence that does not depend on having answers or always knowing what we are doing or where we are going. It is a confidence from living in response to those words - Do not be afraid; I am with you as your shield. Your reward will be great. It is confidence that grows in us as we live our lives out of that sacred center, that deep mystery of God's presence, love, and leading.