

March 1, 2015 /Second Sunday in Lent/David L. Edwards

### 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 the challenge of staying open to the presence and movements of God that are always bringing about new life. They are also about the nature of faith as trustful living as we follow Jesus on the journey of responding to God's call in our lives.

Abram is ninety-nine years old when God offers partnership in a new venture, a covenant that will bring blessings to coming generations. This calls for a new name. Abram, "mighty ancestor," becomes Abraham, "father of nations." Notice the shift from the past to the future, from what has been to what is going to be. When we are fully in the present, where we meet God, then we are always on the threshold between what was and what is to be. Isn't Abram way too old for such foolishness? When he was seventy-five, God called him to pack up everything, leave home, and travel to some unknown land that God was going to give him (Gen. 12). Wasn't that enough? 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 this can happen! A little later on (17:19), God says that the child's name will be Isaac, which means "laughter." I think God wants Abraham and Sarah, who also laughs when she finds out about it (18:9-15), to remember their disbelief and how bound they were by conventional thinking, how limited was their vision.

We are immersed in conventional thinking, which keeps us closed to the presence and movements of God. As young children, our imagination is vivid. We see the world around us in a vibrant, dynamic way. We try new things and are open to possibilities. As we grow older, we are socialized to "fit in", to put everything in little boxes, to settle into comfortable routines, physically and spiritually. We take on a "been there, done that" mentality. It's just too much trouble to think new thoughts or grow in new directions or move out in a new ministry.

When we speak of God, we mean the very Power of life, and in that realm, there is no such

thing as the habitual. Life is always simmering with potential and newness. To be people who are spiritually open to God, who are willing to go to that deeper level of the life of the spirit (*kairos*) and not of the calendar or clock (*kronos*), 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 Abraham became a model of faith. He finally said: Okay, God, here we go, one more time.

Faith is trusting in promise, in hope, in new life. It is letting go of the things inwardly and outwardly that keep us from moving out into this new thing God is always doing. There is no pattern, no road map, 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 to that voice within us calling us to be who God made us to be and to do the things God is giving us to do.

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. To Peter this is crazy talk. Peter had signed up for what he thought would be a cruise to victory, a successful religious movement that would sweep away the oppressive political and religious powers. That's what a real messiah was supposed to do, bring in a new day, a new rule, throwing out the old guard.

Jesus, however, knew of another kind of "Son of Man", and embodied it in his own life. It was the "suffering servant" of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke, one who, by faithfulness through rejection and opposition, would be the instrument of God's renewing love. Here is a clear rejection of the idea, which is painfully evident today, that religion is about power and dominance. Jesus is talking about the way of love and service that is willing to suffering. I think Peter totally missed the part about Jesus rising from death—went right over his head. So he takes Jesus aside: "Jesus, we have to talk!" The Greek words used here mean something like taking someone by the shoulders to be face-to-face. Like a basketball coach taking a player out of the game because of some mistake, and getting in the player's face. In return, Peter gets a reprimand from Jesus, not in private but right in front of the other disciples. Jesus calls him Satan, one who distracts folks from what is right. Jesus 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 one.

Jesus then turns to the disciples, the crowd, and, we can say, to us: If you want to go with me on this journey, you have to deny yourself, take up your own cross of faithfulness. If you want to save your life, hang onto your life, 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, play it safe, protect your assets, you will end up losing your very life, the essence of who you are. The

word Mark uses here is not *bios*, from which we get biology, physical or bodily life. It is *psuche*, from which we get psychology, and it means spiritual life, one's soul, the essence of who we are as those created by God. Denying the self in this sense does not mean hating ourselves, inflicting psychological suffering on ourselves. It is about going beyond the small self, the dominion of the ego, and experiencing resurrection, if you will, of the new, larger self, the authentic person God made us. Paul later spoke of this as dying and rising with Jesus. Bearing our cross means living out of our love of God and service in the world. It means our authentic, true life, which will often be in tension with the human world around us. It will be our deepest joy, but will also mean struggle and sometimes suffering. But there will always be, along that journey, the emergence of new life, resurrection.

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, and thus living. 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 seeing that is open to God's spirit and leading and will. I believe it is 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 small child, we cannot enter God's kingdom, life as it is meant it to be. To follow Jesus is to quit hanging onto fixed ideas of the way we think 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, which cause us and our society so much misery. And it is to let go of the things we think bring us security, but in reality only fill our lives with anxiety and fear and defensiveness.

It comes back to the meaning of 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 heart, or whatever—as we grow in our sensitivity to God's presence and leading, and as we grow in love.

We can't leave this story from Mark without saying something about Jesus' last statement. If we are ashamed of Jesus and his words, then Jesus will be ashamed of us. I don't believe in shaming people, especially children. That is not what Jesus means. To be ashamed of Jesus and his teachings simply means that we do not LIVE as those who are following Jesus. It is the same as he says elsewhere, that we cannot call him Lord and not live according to his teachings, his spirit, his "way". We live in a time when our society is seeing a lot of this. People are identifying themselves as Christian, while they are embracing power, wealth, violence, war, prejudice, and judging of others. It becomes increasingly clear to me that Jesus was not in any way trying to found a new

religion, or defend or promote his own religion. He was deeply interested in living the essence, the truth, the heart of religion. That is, he was more interested in our being true human beings the way God made us to be than in being “religious”.

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. It is also the wellspring of our outward journey, envisioning and then giving ourselves to those dreams and visions for what could be.

That has been the story of this little community. As we are open more and more to the living God who is always creating new life, we are freed to see things that could be. Wouldn't it be great to cut and deliver firewood to all the people in the city who depend on dangerous wood heaters for heat and cooking? That was the vision of the Wood Ministry. When people started coming by the wood lot asking if there were any jobs, then the question arose: Wouldn't it be great to have a ministry that helped people find jobs and then to support them in those jobs? That was the beginning of New Land Jobs. Wouldn't it be great to have a ministry for children? That question evolved into, Wouldn't it be great to have a cafe in the Lodge of the Fisherman at which children would be welcome, which could be a source of financial giving to programs in our city that serve children? That was how the Common Grounds Cafe began. Or, Wouldn't it be great if people could come to these beautiful and peaceful acres for personal retreat, for silence and rest and renewal, to touch nature and their true selves, people of all spiritual traditions or of none? Thus, the Chrysalis Interfaith Retreat Center. For years The Haven Mission Group has been opening itself to God's dream for a place where men and women in recovery could live and support each other in their continuing recovery. And so, The Haven Mission Group envisioned The Healing Place of Southwestern Virginia. Getting in touch with the God of promise and life. Opening ourselves to how that God is moving in our own lives in each stage of our lives, the visions and dreams of what we can do and be for the sake of life around us. And in all of this, following one who has gone before us, showing us that being faithful will often lead to struggle and rejection, and maybe real suffering. But there is and will always be new life for those who live that journey. Loving service will always lead to new life.