

March 13, 2022

Second Sunday in Lent

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St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

Genesis 15:1-12,17-18



Albert Einstein was once traveling from Princeton on a train when the conductor came down the aisle, punching the tickets of every passenger. When he came to Einstein, Einstein reached in his vest pocket. He couldn't find his ticket, so he reached in his trouser pockets. It wasn't there, so he looked in his briefcase but couldn't find it. Then he looked in the seat beside him. He still couldn't find it. The conductor said, "Dr. Einstein, I know who you are. We all know who you are. I'm sure you bought a ticket. Don't worry about it." Einstein nodded appreciatively. The conductor continued down the aisle punching tickets. As he was ready to move to the next car, he turned around and saw the great physicist down on his hands and knees looking under his seat for his ticket. The conductor rushed back and said, "Dr. Einstein, Dr. Einstein, don't worry, I know who you are. No problem. You don't need a ticket. I'm sure you bought one." Einstein looked at him and said, "Young man, I too, know who I am. What I don't know is where I'm going."

With Genesis 15 open before us, I want to think about how to live in a world that you don't know where it is going. Our text is about doubt, and fear, and faith, and hope. It's a text about how to be a human being in relationship to a God who promises you a future that is good but can't be controlled. And it raises the question: how do you live faithfully when you don't know where you are going?

Abraham is old. Too old to have a child. And here at the end, he begins to doubt the God who called him out of the Land of Ur. Remember in Genesis 12 we learned how Abraham left home, and kin, and nation to chase after a new future, a new land, a new beginning. In search of his own Genesis. The years have passed, home an even more of a distant memory, and there was still no child, no heir, no future.

It's into this uncertainty, into this future hanging in a balance that our texts meets us. The divine word comes to Abraham in a vision. Though Abraham doesn't see anything, he hears a word. That word is: "Do not be afraid." "Do not be afraid, I am your shield." God comes with a comforting and consoling word. And yet, did you catch how Abraham replied? The Father

of our Faith, Father Abraham, crossed his arms, stomped his foot and said, “What will you give me?” That is so embarrassing you have to wonder why they bothered to write this down. The Lord GOD came to Abraham and the first thing Abraham said was, “what will you give me?”

Now before we laugh Abraham off and assure ourselves we’d never be this impolite to a visit from the divine, let’s have some sympathy for the Father of our Faith. Who of us isn’t tempted to turn faith into a means to get something from God? If we are good people, if we live upright and godly lives, God will bless us. We look to God for health and happiness; God is there to help our team win; our cause flourish; there for our self-development. I find this opening exchange terribly convicting. God comes with a word of comfort. God comes and tells me never to be afraid. God says I am your shield. I will keep you safe. Though you have left home and fatherland, and you sometimes feel lonely, you will never be alone. I give you my love, my peace, my presence. And, like Abraham, I know what its like to to hear all of that and then say, “What else?” “I don’t have an heir,” Abraham tells God in the next verse. As if God isn’t well apprised.

Isn’t it easier to recognize the things you don’t have in your life than the things that you do; to bemoan what you lack, instead of reckoning with all that you have? To notice what’s wrong with the world disproportionately more than you savor what is good and true and beautiful in it? We shouldn’t be too hard on ourselves about this. We should just be aware of it. And we should be aware of the fact that we live in a late capitalistic society that feeds off of us feeling dissatisfied with our lives; disappointed with our images; forever vigilant to what we don’t have; always feeling incomplete, restless, like we need more – more trips, more homes, more security, more stuff. How do you live faithfully when you don’t know where you are going? Begin where you are. Give thanks for those people, those kindnesses, those graces that make your present life possible. Practice contentment; make peace with the life you don’t have. Recognize who God is for you.

God is patient with us. It is God's glory, as the collect says, to always have mercy. God would have had every reason in the world to get angry at Abraham. To forsake God's promises to him. But God is faithful. God takes Abraham by the hand and leads him outside and asks him to notice the stars. I love that the text tells us that God led Abraham outside. This assumes that he was inside. An important detail. His world was small, his horizons were no bigger than his bedroom, or the tarp of his tent; he couldn't see the stars. He was lost in the darkness of his own worry. God meets him here, and leads him outside to notice the stars.

You've stepped outside before late at night; you've stepped out and let the crisp night air fill your lungs; maybe you've laid the burden of your day down before the night sky; laid in the grass and let yourself feel small before the swirling lights. "Look to the heavens and count the stars. If you can count them." The beauty and the grandeur of the heavens. Contemplate that the light from those stars will take several hundred thousand years to reach this earth. Yet trust that the light is approaching. It's an amazing thing that God had pointed Abraham to the stars. For surely God could have said rather matter of factly to him, "Abraham, you are going to have many offspring. May it be so." God doesn't do that. For God is the one who created those stars, who, as Isaiah says, knows each star by name, and he draws his children out to contemplate the beauty and grandeur of creation, these natural parables of divine love. How do you live faithfully when you don't know where you are going? Contemplate beauty. Notice the created world shining all around you. Squirrel and swan and beetle and beaver – they don't worry about their future. Let some of their peace into your soul.

But notice that God does more than ask Abraham to contemplate creation. The God of the Bible is much more than the God of Nature. The Old Testament is not Deistic. God isn't a vague spiritual force. God is relational. God is a God who makes promises. God doesn't just ask to be adored in Nature. God asks to be trusted with our lives, with our futures. "Your descendants shall be as numerous as the stars," so God says to Abraham. This is an outrageous promise. A promise that is impossible. Abraham

is old. Old enough to know some things about baby-making. Abraham knows that God is promising the impossible. And yet the text says that he believes God. The old and what we might call “future less” Abraham, trusts God to make a future for him. To make a way where there is no way.

I remember being at a retirement party for my bishop in Pittsburgh, and he was talking about how his career was winding down, and how he had a couple of things to do, a couple of finishing touches to put on things before he and his wife retired to the White Mountains for their last years together. It was totally understandable; we all were basically raising glasses to his retirement. But it was at this point that one of my colleagues shouted out, “Hey Dorsey, God didn’t get started with Abraham until he was 75; God isn’t done with you yet.” “Hey Abraham, I’m not done with you.”

I think Genesis 15 reminds us that God is doing more in and through our futures than we dare realize. No, we may not be birthing a child at the age of 75, but God is always birthing something in us and through us. God is never through with us. Never pack it in on your future. Which is to say, never pack it on God. How do you live faithfully when you don’t know where you are going? When you look at your future. When you plan for your future. When you think about retirement, and finances and security for you and your family, and how you want to spend your last decades, are you leaving room for God? Are you open to God? Do you, can you believe that God is just now getting started?

Well, the text ends by saying that Abraham believed God, and that God counted him as righteous. What is it that Abraham came to believe? What was the content of Abraham’s belief? What was he believing the Lord would do, or could do? What was the question that belief in the Lord was the answer to? Here we have to be careful. For we know how the story ends. We know that Abraham was given a child. We know that a nation did come from his seed. We know that through him blessings have flowed down upon Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Abraham is a major character in the best selling book of all time. Yes, but Abraham

didn't know any of this. Abraham couldn't see the future. He didn't know where he was going. To read this passage as saying that if you just believe God, if you have enough faith, you will get blessings and rewards and all of your heart's desires is just wrong.

Abraham had to learn that faith is not a coin you drop into a vending machine and out comes whatever you want. Abraham trusts the future not for what he will get from it, but from who he can meet there. How do you live faithfully when you don't know where you are going? It is to trust the future. To open your heart to the future. Not to try to plan it away. Or control or predict it. But to open yourself to it. Trusting the future is less about believing that we are always guaranteed successful enterprises, and more about delighting in the fact that the future is full of God: a God too free to control; too loving to do anything but embrace.

