

LENT 2C [1686] St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church

February 28, 2010 {1501R} Florissant, Missouri

TEXT: Genesis 15:1-12,17-18

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For a few moments let us imagine what it must have been like for the Hebrew people who had been taken into exile in Babylon six centuries before Christ. Everything that had sustained their faith in God was now gone. The king, who was supposed to have God's power to defend his people against foreigners, has been exposed as a weakling. The Temple, the very house where their God lived, has been leveled. And most of all, the land that God had promised to their ancient ancestor Abraham was now under the control of this Babylonian king, who did not care a fig for their God. How could their faith in God be preserved under those circumstances?

Now visualize, in your mind's eye, a Sabbath gathering of the Hebrews living in Babylon. Even in exile, devoid of all the concrete signs of God's faithfulness to his people, they continue this tradition of their faith, perhaps out of habit as much as out of devotion. One of their wiser men, a man they have identified as a teacher of their traditions, brings out a scroll on which was written the stories that had, until now, been transmitted almost entirely by word of mouth. The Rabbi, as he is called, reads from the Genesis portion of the scroll. The story is about the founding patriarch of God's people: Abram as he is called here; Abraham as he will be for ever known.

The story tells us that the concrete rewards that God had promised Abram, when he had lured him away from Ur, had not yet been delivered. In this story God appears in a vision to reinforce Abram's trust in him, repeating that his rewards will be very great. But Abram protests. The heir that he has been promised--the biological son who will continue Abram's line and begin the propagation of his offspring--has yet to be born; and Sarah, Abram's wife, is well past child bearing age. The God in Abram's vision responds by pointing to the stars and says, "So shall your descendants be." The Rabbi then reads the punch line to the story: "And [Abram] believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness."

The message was not lost on the exiles. They knew the rest of the story. They knew that God's promises had been fulfilled, first in the birth of Isaac, and then in Jacob and Esau, and then in the twelve sons Jacob sired, who became the patriarchs of the tribes to which all of them belonged. But they also knew that at this point in the story, Abram had only God's promise to go on. Nothing in Abram's situation at the time provided a reason to believe. God's pointing to the stars was hardly proof that he would fulfill his promise. *Yet Abram believed*, and for God that was enough to realize that the relationship he had established with Abram was in good order--that Abram was "righteous" in his relationship with God. So if there was nothing in the present circumstances of the exiles to provide a reason for trusting in God, they had an example from their past that could bolster their faith, and sustain them in a right relationship with their Lord.

Many years later, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews would comment on this story by writing, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." He was

encouraging the first century recipients of his letter to hold fast to their trust in God, even as Abraham did, when there was nothing in their world that gave them a good reason for doing so. He could just as well be writing to us. There is always so much in the world that seems to indicate that God is not keeping His promises. It is now two thousand years since the Messiah walked this earth, and we still seem to be in exile from tangible evidence that Jesus has made any real difference in the human condition. Evil still stalks the earth in the form of political tyranny; in the form of poverty, disease, famine, crime, and other kinds of correctable human suffering; and in the form of racism, sexism, and other kinds of elitism that divide human beings from one another, and legitimize the oppression of millions of people. What concrete reason do we have to believe that the Good News is truly good news?

We don't have much. But neither did Abraham. The birth of Isaac--a single son-- was all Abraham had to assure him of things hoped for and convince him of things not seen. One baby is a far cry from descendants as numerous as the stars. But Abraham believed with all his heart that this one child was the beginning of a very long process that would lead to the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise.

Like Abraham, we are given assurance and conviction of things hoped for in little beginnings-- the little acts of our fellow Christians that point to the real presence of God's kingdom in this world. They reveal that God is at work by living out their baptismal promises in their daily lives: making Christ known to others by the examples they set, seeking to serve Christ by serving their fellow human beings who are in need, and striving to establish justice and peace where they live and work. We see the seeds of what life is like in God's kingdom in the gathering of the faithful Sunday after Sunday for worship, and in the tangible sign of God's love for us when he feeds us with the mystical Body and Blood of His Son.

The little beginning in Isaac assured Abraham that the God who summoned him from Ur *could* accomplish what he promised by giving a baby to a very old woman. To find assurance of things hoped for and conviction of things not seen in small beginnings requires a leap of faith.

But it is the kind of faith that imparts meaning to life when everything seems so absurd.

It is the kind of faith that allows us to define who we truly are and what we stand for when there are so many competing ideas about who we should be and where we should stand.

It is the kind of faith that permits us to determine what has real value, and to value ourselves, when so much in this world is demeaning and vulgar.

It is a faith, like Abraham's, that believes our hopes will be fulfilled in the long course of history. It is a faith that believes God's kingdom of love is real and available to us now, even if we cannot see it in its entirety.

It is the kind of faith that puts us in a right relationship with God.

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