

SERMON: Church of the Holy Spirit, Wayland, MA – February 28, 2010

Sermon for the 2nd Sunday in Lent – Church of the Holy Spirit, Wayland – The Rev. Dr. Frederick P. Moser, Rector

Ask Jewish friends who their Biblical model of faith is, and they will most probably say Abraham. They might also mention Sarah, maybe Ruth and Naomi, or even Esther, but Abraham will always be among them. And, he is for Christians and Muslims too, the father of “Abrahamic” faith.

“Faith,” though, has been a problematic word for Christians, as we have obscured its Biblical meaning with concerns for doctrine. When we think of faith, most of us are apt to think primarily of a set of beliefs that define Christianity, and hence that ought to define us as Christians. We think of the Nicene or Apostle’s Creeds, for example. Being a Christian, we say, is believing that Jesus was the incarnate Son of God, that he died to redeem us from our sins, that after he died he was resurrected, and that because he was resurrected God will also raise us to a new life – to heaven – when we die, if we believe these things, if we believe in Jesus. Christian faith, we say, is holding these core beliefs, which we believe God requires for our salvation. Abraham for us thus becomes the model of someone who does what we are supposed to do; he is someone who faithfully, trustingly, does what God requires, even when it is something very difficult like leaving his friends and familiar life in Ur to go to a new land, or leading his son to a place of sacrifice because God told him to. The pattern from Genesis seems clear: God commands and Abraham obeys, God requires and we believe. But, suppose you find it difficult to hold one or more of these Christian beliefs, these doctrines. Does that mean you are not a Christian? Does that mean you are not faithful?

It is worth looking more closely at the story of Abraham, which is why, I think, our lectionary now always appoints one of these stories for the Second Sunday in Lent. We need to rethink, and maybe recapture the deep Biblical meaning of faith. Look at where we are and at what happens in today’s passage from Genesis as we join the story of Abraham. God reiterates God’s great, but vague promise:

“After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.’”

After what things? After what things, did the Lord come to Abram? Genesis chapter 12 describes Abram’s call to leave his Mesopotamian homeland for the “land that God will show him.” He travels with his family, including particularly his nephew Lot, to the Negev where they live for a while until there is a famine. To survive they go on all the way to Egypt. Eventually, though, they are sent out of Egypt when Pharaoh discovers that Sarai, to whom Pharaoh had been attracted, was actually Abram’s wife and not his sister, as Abram had told Sarai to describe herself, thinking that doing so would keep Abram from being killed in Egypt. They leave Egypt and go to the Jordan River valley,

where Abram and Lot separate, Lot heading for the land to the east near Sodom and Abram to the west to the land of Canaan, eventually to Hebron. Then Genesis 14 describes a war in the region around the Dead Sea in which Lot is taken captive. Abram hears of his nephew's fate and comes to his rescue. As we pick up the story today Abram has won the battle and restored Lot and his family to safety. But, what now of God's command and the promise that set this long journey, and all these events, in motion?

Abram asks a question: What is this all about Lord? Why this long journey, these narrow escapes, and battles with people I never knew? How is this leading to what you promised? And, what will the future be anyway, since I have no heir?

"The Lord said to Abram, 'Do not be afraid; your reward shall be very great.' But Abram said, 'O lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?'" (Eliezer was a slave Abram adopted to protect his assets – a practice permitted when a man had no heir.)

Here then is Abram, the great model of faith, at the limit of what he can believe, at the limit of faith. "Where is this going; how is the promise going to become reality?" Abram wants to know. It is unclear, God, he is saying, how what you have promised for my life, and for my family's and the life of my community – your people – how this is going to come to be. We have come a long way since leaving Ur, and a lot has happened. But, it really is not clear where this is leading; and, the elephant in the tent, so to speak, the enormous obstacle to all this, is that there is no one to carry it forward.

Without questioning, Abram left everything in response to God's command to go and the promise of a blessed life. Now, at the core of this seminal story of faith, trust, and obedience, comes this most profound moment of the questioning. Why? How? What possible future here can there be? I think there is hardly any adult who hasn't been in this place. We ask these same questions. We may try to respond to God in faith; we do what we believe God asks. But, there is a point at which we ask, "Where is this going? How is this going to work out?"

Can someone who asks these questions still be called faithful? What is Abram's story telling us about the deeper meaning faith? We have become used to thinking of faith as obedient response to God, "blind trust" if you will, and unquestioning assent to certain essential beliefs, doctrines. But, the story of Abram after the wearying battle for Lot's freedom shows us that questioning God is also part of what the Bible understands by faith. The story tells us that faith has to do not primarily with believing core doctrines or with unquestioning obedience, but with commitment to the journey with God, both when the way looks clear and when it does not.

In a beautiful metaphor God takes Abram outside for a view of the bigger picture. When you have had questions like Abram's have you ever stepped outside at

night, and looked up at the sky? “Look at the stars,” God says. “When you finish counting them let me know, because that is how many descendants you will have before this journey ends.” Then, Genesis says, “Abram believed, and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.” The text reveals that for God the important thing is the journey. Abram agrees to go on. The text doesn’t say he agrees to stop asking questions, or to affirm something about God’s nature, or even to stop worrying about the future. It only says that he believed and went on, on the strength of God’s promise alone. Abram doesn’t really know anything more than he did before. God didn’t specifically say even now that Abram would have a child. God certainly didn’t tell him any more than before how the future would unfold. The likelihood is strong in fact that what the text implies here is even that God didn’t know how the future was going to unfold. All God promised was that it would unfold, and, in response, Abram promised that he would part of it. And, that was sufficient, the Bible says, for faith.

The faith of Abram, it turns out, is at heart a questioning faith, one that wants to know more, but that goes on with or without more. “How can I know that I am to possess this land?” Abram still asks. Genesis describes a dream and an ancient covenant-making ceremony in which God’s promise is sealed. But, again the story draws our attention to the power and presence of God in the moment, and away from our anxieties about exactly how God will do whatever we think God needs to do to bring about the future as we may have imagined it. Faith is about the journey, not the nature or qualities of God.

Lent is an opportunity to rethink what faithfulness can mean for us. Marc Borg, in the book we are reading together in our adult study this year, Conversations with Scripture, reminds us that the first name by which the first Christians were known was “the Way.” In the first century early Christians were called “followers of the Way,” implying that for them discipleship was a journey, a way of living, not a set of beliefs. We could do well to recapture that understanding, and incorporate it into our contemporary identity. In Jesus Christ God has given us the pattern of the life, death, and resurrection that characterizes the way of faith. Like Abram with his God, staring that night at a star-studded sky high over the Judean wilderness, that same God invites us in Lent to continue the journey begun at our baptism, knowing not how it will unfold but only believing more deeply the promise that it will.