

God's Promises and Our Faith

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The Second Sunday in Lent
February 28, 2010

Genesis 15:1-6; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

Text: "'Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then [the Lord] said to [Abram], 'So shall your descendants be.' And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness." -- Genesis 15:5-6

Someone very wise – it's often attributed to the Greeks – once said, "Be careful of that for which you pray, for it shall surely be yours." And someone else – and this one is always attributed to a wise Greek – said, "When the gods are angry with us, they give us what we want."

The story of Abraham, from which this morning's text is taken, is not from the Greeks; it's from the Hebrews, our spiritual ancestors. It's from the story of a man and a woman who desperately wanted children, for they had been promised by God that they would be the ancestors of descendants more numerous than the stars in the sky or the sand on the seashore.

That was God's promise to Abraham, but being childless, he couldn't imagine how it would be fulfilled. As he said to God in today's reading from Genesis, "'O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?'

"O Lord God, what will you give me?" Isn't that the prayer of so many of us when we get down to serious praying? Don't most of us pray for something, especially something we care about?

We're taught from an early age, almost as soon as we can speak, "And God bless Mommy and Daddy and Grandma and Granddad and all our friends at school and church and next door and Spike the dog and Attila the cat" and so forth.

We're taught, at the most formative stage of our spiritual lives, to ask God to take care of us and our loved ones, which, at that stage in our lives, is the thing we want most. Security is terribly important to children, and we're taught that God will provide that security for us, usually in the form of our parents and other caregivers. And in the majority of cases, that security is provided and our child's religious universe holds together.

We do mature, of course, and as we grow older our circle of concern enlarges, and the nature of our prayer changes, and we find ourselves praying for guidance, for support through difficult times, for comfort for those in pain. We pray for a troubled teenager, perhaps our own, perhaps one we know. We pray that a difficult pregnancy will turn out all right. We pray for God's comforting Spirit to be with someone who's just been diagnosed with a terminal illness. We pray for God's will to be done as we search for a new job or a new home or a new president. And so on.

So much of our prayer is intercessory: we pray to God on behalf of ourselves and others. It's not quite the same as "O Lord God, what will you give me?" but it's very close. We're asking God for things: for comfort, for healing, for guidance, for support. We're asking God for things we want.

So it should come as no surprise that many of us grow up to become disillusioned with a religion like that, a religion predicated on the notion that God should give us what

we want, even if what we want is noble and spiritual and for the welfare of others. When we don't get what we want, for ourselves or others, we feel that God has let us down, and if God is all-loving, as we say, God would never do something as mean as disappoint us, so, therefore, God must not exist, at least not as we were taught as children. And most of us are too caught up in the joys and responsibilities of life in adulthood to work out a more mature understanding of God, and so our faith – our childhood faith – withers on the vine of grown-up living.

That's what happens to a lot of people who were raised in the church and now have no need for it. Millions of thoughtful people find organized religion not worth the effort; they call themselves spiritual but not religious. Organized religion seems to many of them so dysfunctional and corrupt and mired in irrelevancies that they feel they're better off using what time and energy and skill and goodwill they have out in secular pursuits, where folks don't argue and fight and break away and form their own churches over every theological jot and tittle.

And today's reading from the Abraham story could lend considerable support to those who feel that religion is more problem than solution. God promised Abraham more descendants than he could count, and God kept that promise. Over three and a half billion of us – about two billion Christians, a billion and a half Muslims, and 13 million Jews – claim to be Abraham's sons and daughters. Jews claim descent from Abraham and Sarah through their miracle baby, Isaac. Muslims claim to be Abraham and Hagar's children through their son, Ishmael. And we Christians claim to be Abraham's children through adoption. We're the Gentile shoot grafted onto the Abrahamic stock of Judaism, as Paul told some of the first Christians at Rome.

Three very ancient and very different religions all claiming spiritual, and sometimes physical, descent from one figure – and we do not get along.

We Christians very early on disowned our Jewish sisters and brothers and claimed their status as God's chosen people for ourselves, even though Paul warned us not to think that God had rejected the Jews. We took certain passages from the New Testament, many of them from the Gospel of John, and read them to say that God had rejected the Jews because they had rejected Jesus, and we, therefore, had the right to treat the Jews as they had treated the inhabitants of Canaan many centuries before: we were given divine license to exterminate them.

And even though Islam officially recognizes Jews and Christians as “people of the Book,” that is, as fellow monotheists, the history of Islamic violence is no less shameful than the comparable history of violence in Christianity.

And the policies of the leaders of the modern state of Israel, leaders who claim to be Jews, toward the Palestinian people, is reprising ancient patterns of oppression, persecution, and dispossession that should have perished long ago on the ash heap of history.

Abraham's children do not get along. We never have and we never will. That may sound cynical or despairing to some of you, but I don't believe in the inevitable progress of the human race. I don't believe, like Monsieur Coué and Walt Disney, that we're getting better and better every day and in every way, and like some great stagecoach we will continue to lumber slowly uphill to God.

Everything I see in human nature and human history tells me otherwise. The century just past, with its ghastly carnage all over the world, should be reason enough for most sensible people to see that the passage of time doesn't equate to moral progress. History repeats itself, and the most fundamental repetition of history is that every generation is born as primitive, selfish, and violent as our cave-dwelling ancestors.

So if you came here this morning believing in the perfectibility of human nature,

I'm sorry not to be able to offer you more sturdy support for that idea. It's not a belief I share, preach, or teach because I don't see it in scripture, I don't see it in our Abrahamic religious traditions, and I don't see it in human experience.

What I see instead is flawed women and men who, like Abraham, trust in a God of justice, mercy, and peace who considers that belief in them to constitute whatever we mean by righteousness.

What I believe in is not Abraham or Abraham's religious tradition, any more than I believe in the religious tradition attached to the name of Jesus. I believe, rather, in the God who called a man named Abraham to follow where Abraham knew not, and who called forth from that man a faith that would plead on behalf of a place called Sodom, so that even a few righteous people might not perish with a great many wicked. A God who can call forth a faith like that is a God in whom I can believe. That's a God whose promises I can trust.

I believe in a God who came among us not with the violence of the Greek sword or the Roman cross, nor with the duplicity of self-serving policies touted as law and order, but with the power of self-sacrificing and life-changing love, who brought into being through that self-sacrificial love a multitude of flawed human beings called the Christian church who believe the promises of God to be true, even as we fail to understand them fully or to honor them consistently. That's the God I believe in.

With my spiritual father Abraham, I believe in a God who is willing to be more than just to the wicked in order to be simply just to the innocent.

With the prophet Isaiah, I believe in a God whose ways are not our ways. Who does not protect the interests of the wealthy, powerful few at the expense of the poor and powerless many who suffer; we do that, in the abuse of our God-given freedom, but God does not.

With the healer and teacher of Nazareth, who renounced violence in all its forms, I believe in a God who calls us daily to take up our cross, not to inflict the cross – or the sword or the gun or the bomb. I do not believe in a God who says to the privileged haves, as a prominent conservative did in 1982, that their nuclear weapons were a marvelous gift from a wise God. I do not believe in such a God as that – not then, not now, not ever.

I do not believe in a God who rejects people because they reject the beliefs of others, whether those others be Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Taoists, or Jains. People do not have to believe as I believe in order to believe in God. People have to believe in God to believe in God.

I'm a Christian not because I believe in Christianity; I don't believe in Christianity, I believe in God. I'm a Christian because I have committed my life to following the life and teachings of a first-century Palestinian Jew named Jesus who was called the Christ, the Messiah, God's anointed one, the fulfillment of God's promise to all people of deliverance from the powers of sin and death and the path to eternal life.

I see in the self-sacrificial love of a teacher and practitioner of justice, righteousness, and peace all I need for this life and any life to come. That is my Christianity. I know, as surely as I know anything, that the way of Jesus Christ is the way to God; that's what I know and that's all I need to know. What other paths God may have laid down for others is not my business. God's promise to me, declared through prophets, apostles, the church, and the Holy Spirit, is that if I say yes to God, God will always say yes to me. That's the promise God made to Abraham and to his descendants forever. It's the promise that God keeps, and it's the promise that keeps us. Thanks be to God.