

A PLACE FOR STRUGGLE

Lent 2 – Cycle C: Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Philippians 3:17 – 4:1; Luke 13:31-35

The illustration in this morning's worship handout pictures Abraham leading a caravan across the desert: the caravan includes his household and all their considerable earthly possessions – Abraham was not a poor man. When we read Abraham's story in Confirmation studies, we trace his journey on a map of the ancient middle east: just from Haran, through Canaan to Egypt, and then back to Canaan, he travelled over a thousand miles on foot, all at God's bidding. Abraham, himself, had no destination in all this journeying: he trusted God and God's voice to direct him where he needed to go. When we heard in last Sunday's First Reading from Deuteronomy the reference to "my ancestor was a wandering Aramean," it was a reference to Abraham.



In this morning's First Reading, we reach the culmination point of Abraham's trusting relationship with God. Perhaps it was because of the recent dust-up with the eastern kings, but he has had enough of trusting God, it seems; and now he asks God to bring things to a close: Abram, as he is called at this point in the story, asks God for an heir and for land.

Abram has a vision; and in that vision God says to him, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward will be very great." In so many words, Abram says to the Lord, "Not good enough! Show me!" And then he reminds God that he has no children, no heir except a slave born in his house.

God answers with, "No one but your very own issue shall be your heir," and then he takes Abram outside and uses the stars of the sky as an example of how numerous Abram's descendants will be. Interestingly, Abram is impressed with this illustration and believes God. Our text says that God credits Abram with righteousness for such faith; but it may be more accurate that Abram credits God as righteous; that it is Abram's response to God that is noted, not God's to Abram.

In any event, their exchange is far from over, although Abram is not the next to speak. It is God, again, who now promises land to Abram, without Abram's asking. But then, Abram cannot resist pressing the point. "How am I to know that this land will be mine?" Abram asks God.

And that prompts what seems to us to be a bizarre covenant ritual. Sacrificial animals are slaughtered, divided in half, and placed in two parallel rows – half of the animal on each side. Normally in such a ritual, those making (literally "cutting") covenant with one another walk between the halved animals reciting something like, "May a similar fate be mine if I disobey the terms of this agreement."

In this instance, there is a far more mystical dimension to the covenant. Abraham falls into a deep sleep, somewhat reminiscent of the "deep sleep" into which Adam fell when God created Eve from Adam's rib. While he is asleep, God essentially walks between the halved animals as a smoking pot and flaming torch. The covenant was enacted, effectively bringing to a close the uncertainty Abram and Sarai had over an heir and over a homeland.

What is represented in Abram's story to this point is the place of struggle in the life of faith. Abram's story is the prototype: both literally and figuratively, his is a journey of faith; and it is filled with doubt and questions and uncertainty. Just as significant as his doubt, questions, and uncertainty, though, is God's faithfulness. God remains faithful to Abram and Sarai, and gives them a son in their old age who does, in fact, continue their family. But we cannot help seeing how fragile Abram and Sarai feel; how their relationship with God, as certain as it appears in hindsight, was clothed in mysticism and intuition with Abram second-guessing himself many times, his acts of obedience notwithstanding.

And what this story shows us is the unique nature of faith. It is not certainty, and it requires struggle, usually what we term an existential struggle. We want to believe, but a part of us keeps us from utter conviction. To be a child of God is to live between heaven and earth; to live with the promise of eternal life and, at the same time, a conscious of our death. It is precisely the place of struggle.

Jesus is made painfully aware of the place of struggle in today's Gospel. The Pharisees who come to him warn him he is at risk. They are not telling him something he does not know, we soon discover through his reply. But he refuses to let them co-opt him into terminating his ministry and mission. He tells them that he has work to do, saving work that must be finished! And in his reference to the "third day" we cannot help thinking that there is a greater reference here to his resurrection and the triumphant way in which his work will be completed. If this reference is intended, it is a correlation to God's covenant with Abram: struggle will not end in defeat. Rather, struggle when God is present ends in acts of grace and mercy.

And then, borrowing from imagery present in the Hebrew bible, Jesus laments the sorry state of the holy city, but then pictures himself as a mother hen gathering together her brood, God's faithful ones, reconciled, redeemed, forgiven. In many ways, it is another sign of covenant love – but it is clearly in the future. In the meantime there is struggle.

In today's Second Reading, Paul uses the term "enemies of the cross" to describe those who choose to avoid the struggle of discipleship to which he calls them in Christ. It is specifically Paul's call to follow Christ that offends them so much, because it requires the trust and faith revealed so perfectly in Jesus in his walk to Calvary; so profoundly in the life of Abram and Sarai as they trusted in voices and visions.

You and I struggle, merely as being human. We struggle with illness and loss and disappointment: it's part of the package of living in this world that is typically more earthly than heavenly. With the father of the boy possessed of a demon spirit in Mark's gospel, we say to ourselves, "We believe, but help our unbelief!" Faith is just as difficult for us as it was for Abram and Sarai: we struggle with the truth that has formed us, because it is always challenged by contradictory evidence.

But this morning's readings lead us beyond the automatic struggle we all experience to a struggle we accept as part of the call to discipleship. We are called to struggle, not merely with existential questions, but rather with the powers and principalities of this world that seek to destroy body and spirit; to destroy the intimations of faith people have; the suggestion that this is still God's world, and that we are the children of God.

And so, when we advocate for those who are poor, for those who are oppressed, we do so recognizing that there is, because of God, a place for struggle in our call. When we welcome everyone into our circle, regardless of how unloveable or how unlike us they might be, we do so because we realize that we are called by God to do so. When we work against greed and industrialization on behalf of the natural world, we do so because this is God's world, and God calls us to interpret the gifts of the earth and nature itself as the very grace of God given for the nurture and preservation of life. And so we struggle against these very things that defile the grace of God. When people hurt one another, just because they can, we move to their side. When people discredit faith in a God who loves unconditionally and gives as a sign the death on the cross of God's only Son, we struggle against the voices that discredit that sign as meaningless.

In Abraham, in Jesus, and in Saint Paul we see our call to live the risen life, the faithful life: these magnificent teachers have shown us God's faithfulness; and with that knowledge, our struggle is worthy. The call of Lent includes the call to struggle for the sake of Christ who, himself, struggled to accomplish our salvation.