

# The Meaning of Faith<sup>1</sup>

Sunday, March 5, 2023

I

Well, it seems to me that all three of our readings this morning are basically about faith. So let's begin at the beginning of our faith story — with the story of Abraham in our Old Testament reading. Actually, in today's short reading, he's just plain old Abram, 'cause God doesn't call him Abraham — the Father of a Multitude — till a couple of chapters further on in the Book of Genesis. So anyway, I've decided to stick with our Old Testament Genesis story this morning and talk about most of Abraham's long story.

And what a faith story it is! And beginning in the beginning with our passage this morning, it turns out Abram's already old, and has had quite a journey up to this point in the plot. See, when God called him from the land of Ur, God had already promised him land. But the problem is, land is passed on through heirs. So Abram and his wife, Sarah, really need a child, but a child doesn't come. Year after year ... a child does not come. And living and wandering as nomads, their saga is filled with hardship and adventure ... holding on — all these years — to the promises of God.

So skipping ahead a few chapters, here's gray-haired Abram as an elderly Jew, still without an heir — 'cause an heir is promise of future. And now God promises such an heir, along with land. But Abram would really like some proof. So he asks, "Oh Lord God, how am I to know that I'll reap this reward?" 'Cause here he is, an old man ... an elderly Jew without an heir.

I mean, Abram knows what's what! And he's been living in a kind of restless torment all these years. And so he wants a sign that God's promise, His promise overcoming his and Sarai's barrenness, is true. I mean, how can he continue to trust in the promise, when all the evidence against it — all this barrenness — surrounds him?

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So God speaks the promise once more. But nothing is offered in this scene except God's Word. Oh, God does step out into the night with Abram, showing him the stars in the black night skies. But this sign in the stars proves nothing. I mean, how could it?! How could this multitude of stars promise a son?

See, I think Abram is really struggling here with belief, with faith based not on human reason but on some core sense that God is God. So it does seem to me that at that point of the story, for Abram, some real certainty is now given out of this darkness. 'Cause somehow he seems to know ... somehow he does seem to believe. And I think way down at the heart of it, this knowing can only be the work of God's brooding care.

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And then this: God and Abram enter into a bizarre dance of a ritual in the middle of that night among a whole barnyard of slaughtered animals.

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Oh, it's a strange, bizarre scene to our eyes. But apparently it was an accepted way to seal a covenant in Abram's day. Cutting animals in half and clearing a path between the pieces, each of the parties of the promised covenant, walking between the severed pieces, like a sort of self-curse. Like saying, "May the same thing happen to me if I don't keep my word. Cross my heart and hope to die ... if I don't keep this promise."

So Abram then sleeps, fitfully — you know, that kind of sleep where something infinitely dark and heavy seats itself on your chest and sucks your breath away. And now, in the middle of such sleep, Abram sees a pot of fire — a flaming torch — pass between the halves of the carcass pieces. And as it turns out, it's the Lord, keeping His end of the bargain.

So that's how Abram's covenant with God is made, in the deep darkness of Abram's night. But still, out of all this, Abram does believe in the Lord's promises. 'Cause the Bible says, "He believed the Lord: and the Lord reckoned Abram as righteous."

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OK. So what's this all about? Well, I think this is basically a story of faith out of darkness; A clinging to belief in God's promises as simple confidence that something makes sense even when everything goes wrong. A clinging to belief, in the end only because God is God.

## II

Well, it's a hard thing to believe in a promise — to live by it, day after day, to see it only in the night sky — a hard thing to believe in a promise with no power to make it come true. I mean, everything is in the future tense — the land, the son as an heir, the blessing. Everything will happen by and by. But in the meantime, what is there to live on now?

And yet — when you think about it — what better way to live than in the grip of a promise, and a divine one at that! To wake every morning to the possibility that today might be the day. To remain wide awake all day long, noticing everything. To search the face of every stranger in case it turns out to be an angel of God. To handle every moment of one's life as a seed of that promise and to plant it tenderly, never knowing if this moment, or the next, may be the one that grows. To live like that is to discover that the blessing is not future but now.

Oh, the promise may not be fully in hand. It may still be on the way, but to live reverently, deliberately, and fully awake — that is what it means to live in the promise, where the wait itself is as rich as its end. A promise as real as the million stars overhead.

### III

OK, so here we are — and, I think right at the heart of this Genesis story, is the core of such a faith as that! Abram asks for a sign, and God shows him the stars ... Abram asks about land, and God's flaming torch moves between them as covenant. Abram asks and wonders and questions, and God answers ... not with arguments but with sheer revelation within Abram's heart and soul. 'Cause I think this story shows a vision, an epiphany, a sighting by faith that shakes Abram into the fulness of a righteous life.

So Abram does move from doubting to believing in God's promise. But here's a question: How? Why? What actually moved him? What made the difference for him? Surely it's not because he feels new, generative powers in his old age. Surely not because he has any new expectancies for Sarah. No. I think the promise for his life does not rest on his own flesh and blood but seems to rest on the Promise Maker instead.

And so I think the deep truth here is that you and I struggle, along with Abram ... struggle along with some deep sense of something certain, resting not on human reason, but based on some primal sense that God is God: that God ... is. And I believe this same God who gives the promise is the one who moves Abram — and moves you and me to belief.

And God does reckon those who believe as righteous. So I believe this story is basically about what it means to be a faithful human, to be righteous. It means to trust God's future and walk in the light of that future, even in a death-filled world of darkness like ours.

And I do think such faith has always been a problem for us, hasn't it? Even the disciples were sometimes "men of little faith" — "anxious about many things." But here's the real point: I think the problem of faith is not a problem for those who've never been marked as believers. No, what God knows ... and what this story of Abram shows ... is that faith is an issue precisely for you who've heard God's call to new life and are struggling to embrace that call.

So again, my point: This strange, mysterious scripture story is, in the end, yours and my story ... the story of our own beginnings as God's people, and it's brimming with real things: faith and doubt, fear and promise. Death ... and life. And I think above all, it's full of relationship: God and Abram talk to each other. God tells Abram what to do and he does it. Abram keeps his part of the covenant, and God comes through with His. Because Sarah did finally conceive and deliver a son called Isaac — but this is a whole other wonderful story in the Abraham saga. For another day.

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So finally — Abram is chosen and he knows it in his soul. And I think this covenant between this old man and his God becomes like a wedding covenant. God says, “You are mine,” and Abram believed — probably because the world made no sense if he didn’t. And then he became God’s partner in a covenant that changed the whole face of history.

My final point is this: As Abram’s heirs, you and I also are wed to a God we did not choose ... but who’s chosen you ... and me ... a God who, with the birth of His Son, became bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. So it may have been Abram who passed through those animal carcasses on that haunted night so long ago, but the covenant survives as our own. And what God has joined together, let no one put asunder.

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In the meantime and finally ... love God by remembering and embracing that covenant ... and by loving God’s presence now in each other. Amen.

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1. Resources used: *Genesis* by Walter Brueggemann (*Interpretation Series*); “*The Late Bloomer*” by Barbara Brown Taylor in *Gospel Medicine*; “*Faith*” by Frederick Buechner in *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC*