

Can God Really Be Believed?

Sometime around 1900 BC, a man known as Abram packed up his family and everything he owned, and left his home and set out on a journey. And he did so, because a voice out of nowhere, a voice that identified itself as God, promised Abram a new land, and many children. At the time, Abram was seventy-five years old; way past the age for adventures, some would say. Although I can't recall scripture saying one way or another, I'll bet his friends and neighbors thought Abram was crazy; just another religious nut.

However, when Abram and his entourage arrive in this new land, a severe famine forces them to flee to Egypt, where there was food enough. And while they were in Egypt, Abram's wife caught the eye of Pharaoh, who took her to be one of his concubines. But a plague fell upon Pharaoh's household, so he sent Abram's wife back to him, and begged them to leave the country.

So far, it's not looking too good for those promises made by that voice from the sky.

Back in the promised land, Abram again heard the voice of God: and again there was the promise of children, and land, and blessing. But can Abram really trust this promise any more than the last? His wife still isn't pregnant. The borders of his land are now being threatened by an alliance of foreign kings. And God's reputation, at least as far as Abram is probably concerned, is hanging by a mere thread.

And that's where we pick up the story in today's Old Testament reading, from Genesis. God's voice is heard once more. It's promise time again, and Abram has got to be wondering what's in store. Twice before, promises have been made, and so far nothing has materialized. Is he really hearing God, or is it just his imagination? Or, maybe, God is simply playing a practical joke on him: "Let's see if I can get Abram – What a dope! – to pack up his household and head off on a wild goose chase." If only he could know for sure. So far, God's promises have been just that, promises. He still has no children, his land is still under threat, his life has been anything but easy, and any blessings seem few and far between. But it's promise time again: "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great."

Oh, really? "Where were you, God, my shield," Abram responds, "when, back in Egypt, Pharaoh wanted my wife for his plaything? Where were you, when my nephew was taken prisoner? And where are you, when my only heir is a slave? You say to me 'Don't be afraid,' but why shouldn't I be afraid? Nothing you've promised thus far has happened. Nothing!"

And finally, Abram is beginning to look a bit more human. And finally, he has the courage to confront God, and give voice to all his anger, and frustration, and despair. "I held up

my end of the deal, God, but you haven't! And here you make another promise. Why should I even bother with it?"

Can God really be believed? That's the question all of us face at one time or another. One only has to watch the news, and see all of the bad stuff going on in the world around us, and doubting God becomes easy. In response to all this negativity, there is one school of thought that says that faith, real faith, is about accepting what comes our way as being part of God's plan for our life. We may not be able to understand it, but we have to believe that God is looking out for our best interests, no matter how bad things seem to get. I knew a woman, the parish secretary of the first Episcopal church I ever attended, who, no matter what happened, would respond with a "Praise the Lord." I admired her spunk, but I couldn't tell if she was being courageous, or simply in denial. But what worries me about this sort of thinking, is that it's a small step from believing in a God who allows bad things to happen to believing in a God who *causes* bad things to happen. It doesn't take much to start believing that God wanted you to lose your job, or your marriage to break up, or your children to get sick.

But there's another school of thought that sees things differently, that understands faith as something to be wrestled with, as something that is hard won. This is the tradition of the psalmists, who cry out to God, (as we heard in our psalm today,)

*Do not hide your face from me!
Do not cast me off, do not forsake me,
O God of my salvation!*

It's the tradition of Job, abandoned by his friends, struggling with a God who seems to let Satan have free reign. It's the tradition of Jonah, sitting under a withered vine, wanting vengeance, and facing instead the inexplicable mercy of God. And it's the tradition of Jesus, alone in the Garden of Gethsemane, and groaning from the cross, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" Time and time again, people of faith have wrestled with God. And Abraham is just one of many who had to wrestle their way to faith, who turn their faces towards God and demand an answer, who struggle with a God who makes promises, but sometimes seems to take an awful long time in keeping them.

I mentioned to you last week that the Cook family recently invited another dog, Jack, to be a part of our family. Sophie, our black Lab, has been Top Dog in our home for the last twelve years, and I think she's enjoyed that status. But when Jack, a seven-month old Welsh Terrier, came into her life, that position seemed under threat. Jack, it seems, needs to need to know what's going on in every corner of the house at any given moment in time, and often his information-gathering forays would take him across Sophie's path. For the longest time, Sophie seemed to be resigned to this ignoble fate, and simply took whatever Jack dished out. But eventually, Sophie started standing up for herself, and a sniff from Jack would result in a snarl and snap from Sophie. "Okay," Jack would respond, "I won't go there." And the rest of us would be quietly cheering Sophie's courage and strength. And though it may be too much for me to

compare Abram to my dog Sophie, there's something to be said for people who stand up for what's right; even if it's a dog.

“Do not be afraid,” God said to Abram. “I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” Could God be believed? That was a question that took Abram many years to answer. In the end, God kept those promises he made to Abram. Some were just a few years in coming; others took generations to be realized. And from time to time, when this promise or that was slow in materializing, and Abram demanded an accounting from God, God would have to remind him: When I promised you land, I gave you land. And when there was a famine in that land, I sent you to Egypt. And when Pharaoh took your wife for his concubine, I sent a plague upon his household. And when foreign kings threatened your land, I protected you. And Abram could see, when he paused to remember, how his *believing* God had eventually led him to *trusting* God; and out of that trust, there came faith. But it wasn't a shallow faith that came from a peaceful, pious resignation to the fates, but a hard-fought and deeply-felt conviction based not upon any promises that were *given*, but upon the promises that were *realized*. And that took time, and it wasn't easy. But – and this may be the main lesson from today's reading from Genesis, and from Abram's life – if you give it time, faith happens.

Let me suggest to you that Lent is a time to wrestle with God; to look at God face to face, and struggle over the promises, to ask the difficult questions, and demand answers from God. For the forty days of Lent, I invite you to wrestle with God, to struggle with him as we move our way towards Good Friday and the Cross. And as we go down that path, we will hear the stories of how Jesus also struggled in the desert wilderness, and lamented over Jerusalem's unfaithfulness, and saw his closest friends betray him, and die. And, like Jesus, we will probably find ourselves wondering if God can be believed, and if it's worth staking all our hopes on his promises. And, like Abram, maybe we'll find time, during our Lenten struggles, to look back on our lives and see where promises *have* been realized, and how God was there for us in the bad times. And remembering, we'll start believing again, and that belief will lead us to trusting, and that trust will lead us once again into faith.

If Lent teaches us anything, it's that faith in God is a risky business. Sometimes it calls us to throw caution to the wind and do things that others may think is crazy. But because we believe God, and trust in him, our faith in God may finally allow us to go where God has beckoned. I can almost guarantee that your journey will involve struggles, and wrestling matches with God; you'll be tempted to compromise your beliefs, and doubt the very words of God. But the beauty of it all is this: wherever we end up, whether it's on a cross or in a promised new land, God will always be with us.