



St. Mark's on the Campus

Episcopal Church and Student Center

1309 R St - Lincoln, NE 68508 www.stmarks-episcopal.org (402) 474-1979

The Rev. Jerrold Thompson

Sermon for the 11th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 14

St. Mark's on the Campus

August 12, 2007

“FAITH is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” The

Letter to the Hebrews paints Abraham as a key figure in our religious tradition when we're talking about the power of trusting in God's promises, even when those promises seem more far-fetched than trustworthy.

In our first reading this morning, we encounter Abraham in the midst of his struggle to trust what looks to be a promise that can't come true. He's an old man and his wife Sarah's an old woman, and they have no children. So how in the world is the revelation Abraham received, in which God had promised to make him the father of a great nation, ever going to come true?

Maybe he just shouldn't believe the revelation at all. Which is worst: not to believe that you've heard a good word from God or to believe that you've heard it but that God has now abandoned the plan – in which case, how trustworthy is God to begin with? Our passage opens with God saying to Abraham: “Don't be afraid, Abraham. I'll be your shield.” Don't be afraid; I am taking care of you. But you'll notice that Abraham does not immediately say, “Oh ok, Lord; no problem.” Instead, he has a little conversation with God. You might remember that just a couple of weeks ago we had another conversation between Abraham and God.

In this one, Abraham is again honest with God. “Things aren’t turning out like I expected, God. The only heir I see around here is my slave – and that’s not what I planned on -- nor is it what I understood you to promise me.” We all know how frustrating it can be when things aren’t turning out the way we expect them to turn out. Add to that Abraham’s expectations being formed in part by a revelation from God, and we can empathize with his frustration fairly acutely.

So the Lord leads Abraham out into the night. Maybe Abraham couldn’t sleep that night; maybe he was wondering about the future. Maybe he was wondering about God. Outside, under the stars, Abraham hears the promise of God anew. Have you ever had trouble sleeping at night because things weren’t working out the way that you thought they should? Have you ever wondered about God’s promises the way that Abraham was wondering that night? Have you ever looked into the future and wondered just where God was in it all?

I sometimes pray with art, and in reviewing some of my drawings recently, I was reminded of just such a time for me. We were living in Cleveland at the time, and I had the sense that I was being led toward a different ministry. So I was doing my part, searching and being open. But about 18 months had passed and I was feeling impatient and I was wondering if I was hearing the Spirit correctly.

I used to spend time at a retreat center near our home, and one day I was out walking around and praying. I came to the edge of a field. I looked up, and I realized that I could not see what was on the other side of that field. I knew there was a path there because I had been on it before -- but I couldn’t see it. If I continued walking, I would come upon it. I realized that God was speaking to me in a very quiet but a very pointed way. Because of that field and the sign that it became for me that day, because of the word I heard, I was able to reclaim my trust that God was leading me. I knew that if I continued walking in faith, I would come upon the path that God intended for me, even though it wasn’t clear

to me at the moment. I was able to move forward more peacefully, knowing that I was being led toward some ministry, even if I could not see it from where I stood.

Something also happened to Abraham that night under the stars. Whereas at the beginning of the conversation he seems to be afraid, deeply unsettled, after his time under the stars, the story tells us that he believes the word of God. He finds his trust renewed in the promises of God. “And the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.” Righteousness, a right relationship with God. In other words, he’s back in a better place with God than he had been.

Trusting God in the midst of uncertainty about tomorrow makes our relationship with God a lot more peaceful, and it enables us to claim our rightful place in God’s world, not abdicating our place as if everything is out of our control because we trust in God but moving ahead in faith and doing our part. That’s the way of our ancestors in the faith.

The letter to the Hebrews reminds us what that way looked like in our ancestors. Because of their faith, they saw the hand of God in the world. Today our trust in God causes us to see the hand of God in the world around us, too, in the air we breathe and the soil that grows our food and the water we drink. We treasure it more deeply for that reason and we take better care of it, we steward it for God rather than simply consume it as if it exists only for our pleasure.

Sometimes when we trust God, we might be asked to move into unknown territory like Abraham was. We might not choose to pitch tents, like he did, but we might choose other inconveniences and self-imposed limitations because of what we believe most deeply about the God who created us and continually moves the world. Some of us will work for peace by protesting war; others of us will join the military out of deep convictions that the military itself can be used to further the peace of God. Different expressions of deep convictions.

Sometimes living with each other is its own unknown territory, choosing to trust that we all are acting out of deep convictions about God even when we disagree about important matters. Choosing to live with each other in love and real relationship despite differences of perspective, and doing so trusting that God is big enough to hold us all. Such trust at its best enables us not only to see one another as children of the same God; it also opens doors for deeper understanding.

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Ultimately, we choose to trust that God is acting among us in a way that will bring life where the forces of death are very real. Together we break bread and pour wine that we proclaim are signs of *Christ’s* brokenness – and we say that in these signs we see the promise of the Lord God to bring life out of death by using his very self.

We pray over bread and wine and then take it within ourselves, and we proclaim that they are signs of God’s Holy Spirit once again invigorating *us*, giving us life in order to sustain us as part of Christ’s reconciling love in the world -- so that we may become, as we pray in the marriage liturgy, “signs of Christ’s love for this sinful and broken world, that unity may overcome estrangement, forgiveness heal guilt, and joy conquer despair.”

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Faith that God is working, and that we are called to be a part of God working, can make an enormous difference in a broken world. We are only a small part of that world. But small parts can be very important parts.

Abraham was one man. Sarah was one woman. But together with God, they create God’s people throughout the ages. Because Abraham believed, we inherit a deep and abiding trust in the promises God makes to all of us.