

February 28, 2010

Second Sunday in Lent, Genesis 15: 1-12, 17-18

Northfield, VT United Church of Northfield

Father Abraham and the God of Surprises

Rev. Roger L. Brown

Introduction and Scripture Text

This morning we examine in depth the life of one of the Bible's towering figures – Abraham. I love to talk about Bible characters. They are fascinating and they always have much to teach us! Characters like Abraham are well known to us, and for many of us, we have been hearing stories about Abraham since Sunday School. Next to Jesus, Abraham is probably the most famous and well-known of all Bible characters. For Abraham is a major figure in the three so-called Abrahamic Religions – Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. So, Abraham is a pivotal character, and it is well for us to get re-aquainted with him.

Now, just to make thing interesting, remember that Abraham is the new name given by God for Abram. So, we shall call him that in the beginning of his story.

The Story in Our Text

In our story, God appears to Abram, and a very special and very important conversation takes place. First, Abram has a big complaint. Look, God, I'm a hundred years old, and I still don't have any children with my wife, Sarah. I know it's too late, but this is my one great disappointments in life. What are YOU going to do about it? I don't care about all the things we've done together in my life. True heirs, true descendants. That's what I want! Then God does a very surprising thing. God says, look up in the sky – out here in the desert where it is very dark and you can see the night sky with great clarity – look up in the sky and see all the stars. Count them, if you can, and that is the number your true descendents will be! Then Abram thought, "that's really amazing, but I believe you."

Next God tells Abram that the land they are in will be for him and his people. But Abram doesn't believe this, and asks God to prove it. So just to prove it, God ask for a sacrifice of a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtle-dove, and a young pigeon. Then Abram falls into a deep sleep. While he's asleep, a fire parades around the sacrifice animals, a fire that represents the presence of God.

Connection with Last Week – Jesus in the Desert

Last Sunday we found Jesus on retreat in the desert, preparing for his ministry. We discovered that in his conversation with God, Jesus had to face 3

critical questions:

1. where am I?
2. how did I get here?
3. Where does God want me to go?

These are the three basic questions of life: who am I?, what is going on with my life? And “what is the purpose of my life?” Interestingly enough, Abram faces these very same questions. And since he is a very different person, with a very different life history, in a very different time, he has very different answers. By the way, I doubt very much if this is the first time Abram has asked himself these questions. However, in one way, it is the first time God has answered them for him in a very concise way.

Abram’s Reflections

Let’s see what Abram might be thinking as he asked these three basic questions of life. (First Question) Where am I? Abram asks himself. “Well, I’m a hundred years old and I must be near the end of my life? I have been very blessed by God, even though he has given me a life full of challenges and surprises. I have a wonderful loyal wife, a good cousin, Lot, and all the animals I need. I guess in most ways I’m in a very good place? But something seems to be missing.”

(Second Question) How did I get here? “Well, I’m a traveling man ... I’m a wanderer. But I didn’t want life to be that way. I began with my father Terah and his family in Haran. Then God told me to go to Canaan, so I gathered everything together and went there. Just when I got settled into Canaan, there was a famine in the land, so I went to Egypt. And when Pharaoh found out that Sarah was my wife and not my sister, he told me to leave. (A long story I won’t tell you right now). So I returned to Canaan, in the land between Bethel and Ai.”

When Abram asked himself the third question: “Where am I going with my life?” This is what he might have said: “Where does my life go from here? I’m not sure. That’s the question I want God to answer for me.”

God’s Answer

As we know, God’s answer was quite incredible. God told Abram that he was to be the founder of a whole people, and that his descendants were that people. God also told him that he would give these people the land of Canaan. What amazing gifts.

If we look at the symbolic nature of these gifts for a moment, it is very interesting. On one level, providing heirs and greatly extended family means to give Abram purpose and God gave him an investment into the future. I think that is one of the gifts we want from God -- a sense of purpose which points life into the future.

Secondly, the gift of land, means God gave the people a place. A holy

God-given place in which to live. Again, this is one of the gifts we want most from God – to be in a place that is right and meaningful for our lives.

Discernment Process

Very briefly, now I want to suggest a couple of things about the way in which Abram was guided by God. The first, and most famous, is that Abram was a man of great faith. He went where God sent him. He didn't look back, and he went not knowing exactly what he was getting into. In fact, this fits very well the text in Hebrews chapter 11:

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

The other important event in this story is that perhaps part of the conversation with God takes place during a deep sleep. This can mean, that for us to really discern well what God might be telling us, we need to set aside the outward, worldly stuff going on in our life and look deep within – even into our subconscious mind.

Closing

Importance of the 3 basic questions

This amazing story has much to teach us. So much, that we cannot begin to get it all in this sermon. It certainly gives us a bit of an illustration of the way the 3 basic questions come into play in discerning our life direction.

Secondly, it gives us some clues the process of personal discernment. It shows the value of having a conversation with God, and even telling him what we want, even if he later chooses to give us something else in life.

Thirdly, this story shows that it is good to have an openness to God's grace, for God was extremely generous to Abram. God gave him what he wanted and more.

Finally, Abram was a man of faith, sprinkled with lots of practical wisdom. He was willing to go on the journey, even as he wanted to settle down.

The Gift of Place and Community

Like Abraham, I believe we, too, have been given the gifts of community and place. We have this church and the wider church as our extended community. It is the faith place we live in and grow in. We are given Northfield, Vermont, and God's world as our holy place to live and flourish. We have “place” and “one another.” What a blessing!

The Journey of the Church in Interim Time

We too are on a journey as pastor and people. We are one the journey of the interim time. Lent is the perfect place for us to begin this journey, and I'm grateful to God that we begin together on this Lenten Season. We will work together in partnership with the Search Committee, so that the congregation can be prepared for the coming of a settled pastor. You will hear much more from

me as time goes on about the landmarks and signposts along this journey. However, I think the life journey metaphor can provide us with critical and wonderful perspective for this congregation on the move into the future. In various ways, we will want to step outside our comfort zone, and take time out from our ordinary church activities. We will take a step back and ask ourselves the same three basic questions that I ask myself on any personal retreat:

1. Where and who are we as a congregation?
2. How did we get here?
3. Where are we going? Where is God leading us into the future? What is the future nature of our ministry?

To answer these questions is to claim and celebrate the character and gifts of this congregation. To wrestle with these questions is to affirm the interim time as a gift for introspection and discovery. And that is the gift of the season of Lent to be granted a time of introspection and discovery. Finally, the most exciting part is to discover a vision for the future.

Concluding Questions and Challenges

So too, we can continue to ask ourselves this Lent, “Where have I been on my life's journey?”

“Where am I now?”

“Where am I going?”

So, as Abraham was willing to follow God's directions for his future during his life's journey, so let us seek God's direction for the future. Amen.