

Sunday, March 17, 2019

Rev. Robert W. Brown

SERMON

The **COURAGE** to face **UNCERTAINTY**
Genesis 12:1-7 and 15:1-8, 12-14

INTRODUCTION:

Whether you are a dyed in the wool believer, secular atheist or floating somewhere along the vast spectrum of religious practice, these stories found in Scripture still remain deeply significant today. You don't have to hold a specific faith or ideology to find meaning and wisdom here.

Those who are willing to let go of the need for strict literal interpretation will always uncover a deeper, resonant truth imbedded in the text. Each individual character and the arc of their adventure, can be viewed as archetypal, symbolic, and metaphorical.

Those who are willing to look carefully at these stories find firm connections to our primal psyche; they represent our common human story. Given the chance, they speak directly into our soul. The stories, lessons and poetic expressions found in all sacred literature are designed to help us gain insight into the transcendent mystery of what is ultimately an unknowable God. Archetypes, symbols and metaphors are the best we can do to explain the unexplainable vastness of God.

When we approach Scripture with an openness to see beyond a simplistic literal bias, we can no longer easily dismiss the ancient texts as antiquated mythology. We begin to discover repeated patterns that consistently point to the nature of God and humanity's relationship to that mystical entity. These stories then become a reflection that reveals the inner landscape of every human being in every time.

Today's story of Abraham is certainly one of those stories. Here we find a wealthy, privileged man who leaves the comfort and security of his homeland to find, what he believes to be, a Promised Land. He courageously walks away from the predictable certainty of all he has ever known, in search of something more valuable. In a broad sense, the story of Abraham can also be seen as the story of America. It's what Joseph Campbell called "The Hero's Journey". Listen to how his adventure begins, as David Hart reads parts of Genesis, chapter 12 and then picks it up again in chapter 15. At this point, our hero is known as "Abram".

SCRIPTURE:

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran. They set forth to go to the land of Canaan.

When they had come to the land of Canaan, the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, "To your offspring I will give this land."

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great."

But Abram said, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus? You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir."

But the word of the Lord came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir." He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, if you are able, count the stars." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." And Abram believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness. Then he said to him, "I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess." But he said, "O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?"

As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. Then the Lord said to Abram, "Know this for certain, your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years, but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.

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This is the Word of God leading us to be a people of God...

Today marks the beginning of the second week of Lent. Our theme for this year's six-week pilgrimage is courage. Courage is not the absence of fear but the

willingness to step forward even though we are afraid. No one can suddenly stop being afraid simply by conjuring up courage. Something more needs to grow stronger within us that overcomes the fear. Last week we examined the courage to see the truth, even when it's more convenient to look away. I heard really good reports from the small group discussions. This week we move on to the courage to face uncertainty.

We know a lot about uncertainty these days. We are living in an unquestionably crucial time in the history of the West. In the last 20 years we've seen increasingly divisive elections and rigid divides in societies. We see a continual escalation of extremism in politics and religion. Did you see the clip that went viral this week of FOX News commentator, Jeanine Pirro ranting about how we should all be afraid of Muslims? It was ludicrous! Extreme positions ignite outrage and draw divisive lines. Extremism is always fueled by anxiety, uncertainty and fear. And too often, the result is another horrible tragedy like we've just seen in Christchurch, New Zealand. Our world is changing faster than ever before and anxiety is the byproduct. Perhaps the only thing we can ALL agree on is that we are all very afraid and uncertain about the future. Is it even possible to face the future without fear? Can we ever be free of this persistent cloud of free-floating anxiety? Probably not, unless we can find the source of true peace. If true and lasting contentment is even possible, how might we find it?

***Spoiler alert:*** Not by bribing college admissions officers.

Let us pray to our God.

*Holy God, we seek your wisdom and assurance this morning. Help us to find the courage to face the future without fear. Open our eyes to the blind spots we can not see, open our ears to hear the deep truths imbedded in your Holy Word. Guide the words of my mouth and direct the meditation of our hearts, so that we might be pleasing to you and a blessing to all creation. AMEN.*

In every life there are defining moments. I'll bet every one of us here can think of five defining moments in under 5 seconds. Some are fond memories such as that night you were engaged to be married, or the time you got that promotion that changed everything, or walking into your first home, or starting a new life, alone in a new city. Other defining moments emerge from sorrow or loss. The time you realized that the marriage was over, or the moment you heard about that tragic, unexpected death, or maybe it was the death of a dream, the one that your entire identity and self-worth was wrapped up in.

When you think about it, every defining moment in your life brought you face to face with uncertainty, insecurity, doubt and risk. And yet, most of us spend a lot of time and emotional energy to fashion a future that is certain and reliable. We

go to great lengths to guarantee our security. We somehow think that safety and predictably will bring us the peace and happiness we crave. But deep down, we also must know that even here in lovely Concord Massachusetts, our world is fraught with the unknown and there are forces and circumstances way beyond our control that loom just in front of us. In such a world, finding the courage to face uncertainty becomes critical to our well-being. But how?

Abram lived his entire life in a place called Ur. For generations, he and his family had prospered there. Then, one day, without warning or invitation, the Lord came to Abram in a vision. Apparently, God manifested in some undeniable way and there was no denying it. We don't exactly know how, but what is clear is that Abram was willing to give up all the certainty he had ever know and deliberately chose a life of uncertainty. The man had no idea of where he was even going! He only knew that he had to surrender the comfort and safety of the known to journey headlong into the unknown. Has that ever happened to you?

Now, it would only be natural to think that when you get a vision from God that launches you out on a glorious and bold adventure, that it would be a magnificent series of daily blessings and delightful surprises. Well, that would be a different book, no doubt written by a deceptive charlatan who is profiting through the exploitation of your fantasy. No one in the Bible lived trouble free. No one ever skates blissfully happy through life, no matter what their Facebook feed looks like.

We don't know anything about Abram's journey to Canaan, but we are told that when he finally did arrive and overlooked the Promised Land it was occupied by Canaanites who were not at all pleased to see him. Not only that but, what good is land, wealth and power when you have no family to share it with or pass it down to? He and Sarah had been trying for years and years to conceive. Camped on the boarder of the Promised Land one night, Abram complains to God like a bitter old man who long ago resigned to a life of constant disappointment. "What can you give me since I remain childless?"

I imagine God smiling now. She suggests they gaze at the stars for a while. After a time, God gently whispers in his ear. "You have no idea what I'm about to do Abram. You will have more descendants than you can count."

It's hard to not be awed and humbled when you stargaze. Abram was both and we are told that in that moment, he believed the Lord. He put his trust in the God who earlier told him, "Do not be afraid, I am your shield and your reward."

Even with all his doubts, fears and insecurity, Abram was willing to partner with God just as he was and simply move ahead one step at a time. The path was not easy. Fierce battles came his way. He fought with his family, marched on his foes

and faced trials of all kinds. Even God flat out told him that his offspring would be aliens in a foreign land. They would be oppressed slaves for four hundred years! Even when we walk hand in hand with God, we are never immune from the certainty of struggle and hardship. God is not unsympathetic to how afraid we really are.

Facing an uncertain and treacherous future, Abram found the courage to continue because he had an unwavering faith in a God who was dangerous, wild and powerful. Clearly, he was at the mercy of events and circumstances that were way beyond his control. Never-the-less, he had the courage to see this truth and came to accept that it was only God who could rescue him from the seemingly endless chaos and adversity. His certainty in times of uncertainty was in knowing that God was with him and God would see him through. It was utter dependence on a power far greater than himself. Dependency on God is what brought him the courage he needed to keep going.

As our world seems to spin faster and faster toward apparent self-destruction, where can we find the courage to face an uncertain future? Is there anything we can do to face tomorrow without fear and constant anxiety?

YES! This is the good news of the Gospel!

First, like Abram we must look up at the stars and be awed by a wild and powerful God who is way beyond all understanding. Second, we must humbly submit to the reality that it is only this very same God, who hurled out the stars and brought order out of chaos, that can rescue us. We are not self-sufficient and we will never be the hero our story. Third, even though we are powerless to change this crazy and brutal world, we can change ourselves. Like Abram, we can throw all our trust in the ways of God. This is the way of love in the face of hate. The way of peace even as wars erupt from every direction. The way of gentleness against a constant barrage of aggression. The way that cares for the other as much as the self.

If you can find the courage to choose this radically alternative way, you will also strengthen a courage that can face any and all uncertainty. It will never be easy. It will never be secure or ultimately safe. You will still suffer loss and disappointment, but you will also know a deeper contentment that comes with knowing that it is God who rescues the world and all you can do is the next right thing that is right in front of you every hour of every day. All of us can do that, and that's all that is asked.

God knows how terribly afraid we really are and so we are given these stories from Scripture. Stories that reveal a God who knows us by name, holds us by the hand and says over and over again, "Don't be afraid, I will help you."