

Trust in God

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Genesis 15:1-12,17-18

As I read and prayed over the passages that we have this week especially our passage from Genesis and the Psalm one word kept coming into my mind, trust. In particular trust in God. I am involved in several situations where I truly need Abram's trust in God to be a model for me. Some of you may also be in situations where this may be important.

Our Genesis passage is the midpoint of the Abram/Abraham saga. He is still Abram and he still has no direct heir so he is bemoaning the fact that someone outside his direct family named Eliezar will inherit. This is very painful given the promises that Abram thought God had made. God has done a great deal for him already yet there is this problem of an heir. In fact Abram who has been faithful gets just a little whiney in this passage.

One of the theological concepts that is important to understand is that in this stage of the development of the relationship between God and man is a quid pro quo understanding. In other words the person does something and God rewards the action. This was the standard understanding upon which ultimately the entire temple worship system will be built 1000 years later. Sometimes we fall into that same trap.

I read a article earlier this week in the NY Times by Kate Bowler who has covered what is known as the prosperity gospel movement. This movement with incredibly wealthy pastors like Joel Olsten who have mansions, private planes etc., teaches that if you are good and faithful God will reward you with material benefits. She was covering them as a person who is a skeptic of this gospel and is not well liked by that movement. It turns out that she was diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer and has about 6 months to live. As you can imagine those within the prosperity gospel community believe this is divine retribution for her writings. There is no compassion in this movement for anyone who suffers illness or tragedy. If you are suffering you deserve it because you have sinned in some way. This is the quid pro quo understanding of God's relationship with humanity taken to a tragic and very misguided extreme.

What is truly remarkable is even this far back in the Bible we see a totally different relationship with God. God tells Abram simply trust me. You may not understand, but you will. Even more remarkable is the covenant that God makes with Abram. A covenant in biblical terms is a promise of a relationship between God and a person or persons. There are two types of covenants, Sinai and Zion. Sinai is like the ten commandments. Keep these and I will protect you.

The Zion covenant is one where the promise is all on one side and in this case the promise is all from God. In a vision God shows Abram the stars and says his heirs will be more numerous than the stars and doesn't ask for anything in return. The passage says that Abram believed. However it is important to know that the Hebrew word used for believe can also be translated as trusted. So the passage could easily say, Abram trusted God.

God then solemnizes this agreement in a way that a person of that time would understand. This is the part of the passage where Abram cuts the animals in two and the fire and smoke pass between them. The fire and smoke represent God making this solemn covenant. Now can any of you think of a time when God is present in smoke and fire? 400 years later in Exodus as the covenant made here is finally coming to fruition, Moses and the Israelites are led by a similar symbol. Notice however Abram does not walk between the animals. This is strictly a promise by God. All Abram has to do is trust. Of course the great challenge for poor Abram is that he will never see the fulfillment of this promise. For it takes 400 years before all of this covenant works out and we see Moses lead the Jews to the promised land.

Paul relies heavily on this in Romans 4 when he talks about our being saved by grace and faith rather than works. The ultimate message here is to trust God and listen to what God is calling us to do.

I am working on memorizing the passage in John from the last supper where Jesus washes the feet of the disciples. In part this passage is a request to trust me, I know what I am doing even if you do not. When Peter asks him, "Lord are you going to wash my feet." Jesus answers, "You do not know now what I am doing but later you will understand." And in fact three days later they do, but at that moment they could not have a clue about what was to come.

The challenge sometimes in trusting God is that we cannot see how a particular situation is going to play out. Wendy was placed at Good Samaritan to either bring the parish back to life or close it. Those were her instructions from the bishop. We had many evenings of wondering what in the world God was up to in her first few months there. During her first vestry meetings they were talking about what could be sold if the church was closed! Talk about a challenge to our trust in God.

Yet we all know how that has worked. They will break ground with Enoch for their family life center. There is an article on the Pilot on line with the story. I also know that part of this trust is that I to am in the right place because the support from this congregation gave Wendy the freedom to take a challenging position. Right now Wendy has found herself in the role of community activist. This is a far cry from her "dream" of being the associate at a large parish where she could focus

on spiritual development and pastoral care. Trusting God will lead us even if we do not know where God is calling us is the challenge.

All through the week as I have been praying about this sermon, the words of Thomas Merton have been running in the back of my head. This is probably his most famous prayer and one that I have used before. But like the prayer of St. Francis I cannot pray this too many times. I have copies in case you want to add this to the collection of Lenten fasts and feast on your mirror.

My Lord God,

I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that
I think that I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire
in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything
apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this
you will lead me by the right road
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore will I trust you always
though I may seem to be lost
and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear,
for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me
to face my perils alone.

Thomas Merton