

February 21, 2016 – Lent 2
Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18/ Psalm 27
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No matter our age or stage in life, we all *need* heroes and heroines, authentic people who serve as mentors, role models, and wise guides to give us inspiration and hope. When we gather for Wed. Eucharist and Healing Prayers, we share each week the stories of various “Holy Women and Holy Men” of the Christian faith. This past week we remembered Absalom Jones, the 1st ordained African American priest in the Episcopal Church. He was born into slavery, and eventually saved enough money to buy his wife’s and later, his own freedom. He and his good friend Richard Allen were strong and gifted lay leaders at St. George’s Methodist Church at the time, responsible for bringing in many black members. Eventually the white establishment felt threatened. Jones and Allen lead a walk-out during a Sunday morning worship service, after an attempt to forcibly remove them from the designated section of the second floor gallery to which Blacks had been relegated. Absalom Jones was instrumental in founding the 1st black church in the nation, St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, where he served as rector for 23 years. Absalom Jones remained the only black Episcopal priest in the nation during his lifetime. Talk about a holy trailblazer!

One of the most important things that heroes and heroines teach us is that challenge, struggle, and adversity provide the building material that most profoundly shapes human character. When we get down to the basics of what it means to be human, ALWAYS our response to struggle and adversity will be at the center of who we are and who we become.

Today in the Old Testament reading from Genesis, we hear about one of the heavy hitters of the Judeo-Christian faith, described as a model of faithfulness. He is the patriarch Abraham, or as he was known at the beginning of his faith odyssey, Abram.

From his homeland in Canaan, Abram receives a call from God. Abram is chosen by God to play a decisive role in God’s plans for humanity. God promises Abram and his wife Sarah 3 things: a land, a son, and numerous descendants who will become a people with a living relationship to God that will bless the world. We pick up the story today when God and Abram are having a heart-to-heart conversation.

Up until now, it has been pretty straightforward: God speaks, Abram listens. God promises, Abram believes. God commands, Abram obeys. There comes a point, however, when Abram finally says, “Wait a minute, Lord. I have a question.” You see at this point in their relationship, there has been only God’s spoken promise – there is still no land and no son to be Abram’s heir.

Abram, a man who is known as a model of faithfulness, wants to know how God is going to keep these Divine promises. Abram looks at his life and says, “It is not clear to me, Lord, how you are going to work things out. There are some pretty big obstacles in the way. I’d like to have just a little more information, a few more details.”

The Lord has just offered Abram reassurance: “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield. Your reward shall be very great.” This time though, Abram does not respond with silent obedience.

“Your promise is all well and good, Lord. But I still have questions. For instance, you still haven’t given me a son. At this rate, my household slave Eliezer is going to have to be my heir, take care of me when I’m old. I’ll have to leave my wealth to him”.

Abram is questioning, and starting to complain to God. And actually his doubts are so strong that he and Sarah have already begun cooking up their own “Plan B”. Abram decides Eliezer his slave will have to be his heir. Sarah’s servant maid Hagar will serve as a surrogate mother to bear them a son, Ishmael. Waiting is just too hard!

One of the greatest challenges of the Divine – human story is at play here. Is Abram going to be able to trust? Can God in fact really be trusted? That dynamic was real for Abram. It was real for Jesus, and would become ever more intense as opposition to him and God’s message grew. This issue of trust - it certainly is real for us, too. Can God be trusted to deliver the good that has been promised, when there is no visible evidence of the promise being fulfilled?

Notice that in this conversation Abram does not cower before God, nor does he skulk away mumbling, harboring bitterness and resentment. He pours out his heart to God in lament and longing, holding nothing back. God’s vision and promises are so long in coming, it’s discouraging. Abram desperately needs to hear from God again. He needs reassurance. And here is one very important lesson for us to take to heart from our forefather Abram. Faithfulness is not just about unquestioning acceptance or silent submission. Struggling with God is also part of developing faithfulness. Because, be honest - do you really know anyone with a “fully and completely developed” faith? I don’t think such a thing exists, because our faith development is a process of building trust in God that goes on for the whole of our lives. Faithfulness in our relationship with God is developing until the very moment we take our final breath and are released into the waiting, loving, arms of God’s eternal embrace.

So – Abram lays out his struggles before God. And God responds to Abram’s need for reassurance by inviting him outside for an astronomy lesson, to have a good long look at the night sky! “Look at all those stars, Abram. When you get done counting them, you will know how many descendants I will give you.”

And the writer says, “Abram believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.” As Eugene Peterson writes in his paraphrase: “God declared Abram ‘Set-Right-with-God.’”

This covenant described in Genesis occurred long before binding written legal contracts were in existence. They were sealed by something more substantial than a handshake. In the ancient Middle East, covenants were sometimes sealed by the custom of cutting animals in half and placing the two halves of each animal apart from each other, making a path between them. The parties making the covenant would then begin walking from opposite ends of the path, between the animal pieces, passing each other in the middle

and ending up where the other person began. They walked between the pieces, declaring that they would be cut in half like these animals if they failed to keep up their end of the covenant. It was like invoking a curse upon one's self – "May I be cut in pieces like these animals if I don't fulfill this promise." Sounds pretty grotesque, doesn't it, not to mention deadly serious.

In this covenant between God and Abram, God and God alone, in the form of a smoking pot and torch of flame passes between the pieces. God seals the deal, and Abram is the recipient of the promise.

Abram's story is our story. It is the story of the promise and challenge of walking with God in this world by FAITH. A germ of a seed has been planted by God in our hearts, the germ of a Divine – human, unconditional loving relationship. It grows. It develops. It faces adversity. It struggles. It fails. It despairs. It cries out for mercy, for help, for hope. And it is in the suffering and struggles of life that trust in God is birthed and deepened. In a world teeming with broken relationships, personal disappointments, public scandals, political game-playing, cultural disrespect, and increased terrorist threats – trust is difficult to extend, sometimes even to God.

So how DO we know that God can be trusted? It's certainly not enough for me to stand up here and tell you that God is trustworthy, which I do believe. For all of us, real fear lives alongside honest faith. Bona fide doubt holds hands with genuine trust. This is our human reality; we live with these tensions, and it's okay. It takes patience to hold these together, so the last line of today's psalm "Wait patiently for the Lord" is good for us to hear, to remind us that God is working in our waiting, in our struggling, in our doubting. Patient seeking, patient searching, patient development of spiritual practices – these give us the time and skills we need to navigate pain, learn lessons, gain perspective, and perhaps even experience God and the world in a new and different way.

The reality is, that to learn and know that God is trustworthy each of us has to experience and recognize God's grace at work in our own life. Grace that comes in the form of God's comfort, presence, provision, guidance, and peace. The reality of God's trustworthiness breaks through to us in many different ways. Think back to a challenging time in your life. How did you get through it?

Each of us will have our own experiences of God's grace. Here are just a few of my own experiences of God's gracious responding to me. So often sustenance comes to me through music. My life's theme song and my favorite hymn is "Be Thou My Vision". That hymn has been a bearer of God's promise of sustaining presence numerous times in my life, always at major turning points of major change. Sometimes it has been something I've read in a book. It happened this past week. I was looking for sermon material in preparation for preaching at last Wednesday's LARC service. I found a meditation on the exact gospel passage I was preaching on, but I didn't need the material for the sermon. I needed those words to help me face another area of spiritual growth God has been calling me to look at.

Most of us, hopefully, have at least one or two “go to” people, wise trusted friends or mentors who can sit with us, listen and give us good counsel, because they know us well, and can share from their own challenging experiences in life. At times it will be something in nature that is especially touching or revealing that serves as a reminder that God “has our back”. It could be the phone call that comes just when you needed it. A verse or phrase from Scripture comes to mind or is printed on a card we receive. It might be a prayer we say in Sunday worship or Morning Prayer that you know by memory, or a prayer a friend offers for you. And this is why receiving the Eucharist as often as we can is vital. We need frequent reminders that God can be trusted. If you have difficulty identifying a time in your life when you could say, “The Lord IS my light and my salvation, the Lord IS my stronghold”, simply and gently look back on your life and ask God to show you moments of God’s loving faithfulness and sustaining presence.

As it was for Abram, so it is for us: when we dare to ask God for what we need, when we lay out our doubts and faith, our fear and trust, it is a sign of the vitality and liveliness of our relationship with God. This is authentic relationship when we can be so honest and open, yearning to trust in the ways and wisdom of God. May our continuing Lenten journey deepen our trust and enliven our faithfulness. May the Spirit show each of us, the ongoing and real sustaining presence of the God who always keeps God’s promises.