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Meditation on the Faith of Abraham

Genesis 15

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Our lives are stories. We're made up of the individual and collective stories of our personal lives, those of our family and friends and communities of which we are a part, and the larger stories of our nation, the human race, the Earth and, indeed, the Universe itself. These stories shape us and challenge us, haunt us and comfort us, cause us to laugh or cry or do both. Stories make us who we are and move us in the direction of what we will become.

The Bible is a story, too. It is comprised of a multitude of individual stories told and written down through the centuries which relate to us people's encounters with God, stories of how individuals and nations act and interact, how they search for God and turn their backs on God. It is the story of how people have understood God at work within their lives and, in fact, it's the story of how God has been at it since before the beginning of things, billions of years ago. My New Testament professor used to say we ought to read the Bible as a parable. She said, like a parable, read it as a story rooted in what happened but much more and deeper than history; read it as a story that's meant to be lived into and acted upon, rather than dissected as dogma, doctrine or flat history that can only be argued about or intellectually grasped.

"I love to tell the story
Of unseen things above;
Of Jesus and his glory,
Of Jesus and his love.
I love to tell the story,
Because I know 'tis true,
It satisfies my longing,
As nothing else can do.

I love to tell the story, twill be my theme in glory,
To tell the old, old story, Of Jesus and his love.

You and I have the stories of God, and of Jesus, from long ago and far away, as well as our personal stories of encounters with God, today. But what about Abraham? Abraham – or as our text for the day calls him, Abram – had no stories about God. Sure, he had those of the gods of his ancestors, local deities who went around doing some things, who were meant to be manipulated for our own ends. But stories of the one God, known eventually as Yahweh? Abraham had no history of God, no reference point, and now, here is the Unknown One coming to him literally out of the blue. Try to imagine what that must've been like. What would be your reaction if someday, you awoke with an overwhelming sensation in you that said you were to pack up everything – family, food, furniture – to go to a country that is absolutely unknown to you, where you know no one, to do something that makes no sense at all, simply because you have this fire inside that, . . . someone or something is telling you've got to go? And what if you couldn't name that someone or something, couldn't express yourself to your loved ones or friends why you were supposed to go, other than you know you must? What if this burning vision within you had no name and you had no story to serve as some kind of reference to make this thing make any sense at all?

If you can imagine just a bit of that scenario, then you can, perhaps, begin to understand the remarkable story of Abraham and you'll know why he is "Father Abraham" to Jews, Christians and Muslims, alike. Abraham was the one who, in a very real way, marked the beginning of our story as people of faith in the One God. He was the first to step off the edge of the cliff, that "leap of faith" we so often eschew. He had no story to support his decision to follow the Voice who called him and his wife, Sarah, out of their barrenness. He had no tangible evidence for this burning vision inside him, and he didn't even have a name for this One who reached out into the land of Ur and touched him. And so, without any ado, Abraham expressed the Sacred essence from the beginning and said very simply, "God."

Have you ever heard the Voice? Ever sense that almost overwhelming movement within you? Have you ever been captivated and captured by some Vision that is beyond you and yet, deep within you?

Abraham's story is our story – should we choose to enter it. His saying "yes" to the Voice, calls us to pay attention to those Holy visions and Sacred prodings that will not let us go. His faith beckons us to step to the edge of the cliff without anything but the word of promise, to take that great leap of faith.

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This week, I've been captivated by Abraham and Sarah, this story of a man and a woman who became so fruitful out of their barrenness and how radically faithful they become to the One who knew them before they even know the Name. There's so much I'd like to share with you today in order that you might live into Abraham's story, but I don't have time. I do encourage you to read what is known as the Abraham cycle in Genesis 12-25, to get a glimpse of this very human, very "messy" and very complex man of stunningly radical faith. Let me simply share with you three things about the story in front of us.

First of all, as the story in chapter 15 opens, you'll notice that Abraham and Sarah have continued on their pilgrimage of hope begun two chapters earlier, on no

other basis than the promise of God that from them would come a great nation in a fruitful land. The promise stands over against the barrenness of the couple and that's hard to handle because the promise of God is either not going to come true or it has been delayed. "We're old!" they must have complained. "We can't have a child at our age! Who can trust in such a thing?" Does it really surprise you when Sarah laughs later on in the story when she hears the full extent of God's promise (Genesis 18)? They are like you and me, aren't they, tempted to not trust, to turn one's back on the whole thing and go home, forget about this one God business, say it was all an illusion. "Why should we trust your promise, God, when all the evidence points us in another direction?"

That's not so different than our story, is it? How do you hold on to hope, to continue to trust in the promise of God's presence when all not only seems barren, but is barren in your life? How do you not simply walk away from prayer, from community, from God, when there are no visible signs of hope for you? It's not easy, is it; hardly possible. This is the scandal Abraham faced - not so different than ours.

Which leads me to my second point. After Abraham's protests in verse 2 and 3, God offers the promise one more time. The text is unambiguous: "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 and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendents be.'"

The only promise is the word. There are no alternative strategies, no substitute solutions. God's response to Abraham is not a fool-proof argument like a legal brief. The promise is the promise – period. "You and Sarah will have a son," says God – period – which was followed by the sign, a glance at the heavens. And that's wonderful, right? But the sign – the multitude of stars in the heavens – proves nothing. What it is, what God tells Abraham to step outside and look to the heavens, is a vision, a revelation that surprises the stark realities of our lives that are so often barren. To gaze into the heavens and see in the stars the work of God, is not something that's some well-thought out rationale. This, as you know when you see a billion stars above or are struck with awe at a sunset or the birth of a child, is a primal awareness, so deep in your gut that it is more real than reason, that God is God.

"O Lord, our Lord,
How majestic is your name
in all the Earth!
When I look to the heavens,
the moon and the stars which
you have established. . . ."
(Psalm 8)

so sings the Psalmist.

The same God who makes stars without number, can also make a son for a barren woman and man. The same God who flings the galaxies into existence and creates a faithful people out of the barrenness of an aging couple, can also make a new life out of your barrenness. It's true, isn't it, that sometimes, there isn't much to stand on when nothing in your life seems fruitful. Sometimes, don't you find yourself at the edge of a cliff and the only thing you're sure of is this Voice inside you beckoning you to trust? You may not understand any more than you understand how this amazing cosmos has come to be over 14 billion years, but the same call given to Abraham: "Trust me. I will give you life. I will keep my promises. I will never leave you alone."

Which leads me to my last point - Abraham's response. He believed. O, he didn't all of a sudden know everything about God. He didn't have a vision of 4 Spiritual Laws – or 5 or 6 or how many there are supposed to be. This isn't about faith as belief in certain things about God which will guarantee salvation. This is about trust. Abraham came to trust the One he was coming to know as God. And what moved him to this new response? I'm not sure precisely, but I know it wasn't because all of a sudden he felt like a young man again, that he'd regained all his physical prowess. And neither was it because he had new expectations for Sarah. The reason, it seems to me, is this: No longer was God for him a hypothesis or some vague, shadowy possibility for the future. He had come, not to know a lot about God; he had come to know God. And now, his whole life would be organized around this One's promise and purpose for the future.

How about you? Will you organize your life around the promises of God? Can you trust the only One who can finally be trusted? Will your life's story be that of following Jesus, the Promised One of God?