

Sermon: Year C, Proper 14
Texts: Genesis 15:1-6
Hebrews 11:1-16
Luke 12:32-40

What is the purpose of Christian faith?

This is a question probably asked too seldom, both by those inside and those outside the church. Many Christians attend services primarily as a matter of routine. It has simply been their longstanding habit. For those who consider themselves non-religious, it's easy to dismiss Christianity merely by parodying it, offering examples of only the worst things done, purportedly, in the name of God. A common assumption of our times, however, made by believers and non-believers alike, is that faith is best when it neither asks too much nor imposes itself too obviously in the public realm. We're all safer when faith is relegated to the relatively minor task of simply providing private, personal solace.

In his own response to this question, the esteemed Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann recently provided a very different reply. He noted that long before Christian faith can make any concrete claims about any of the specific issues of our lives – what we should do and how we should live – faith is first and foremost, he said, the “practice of poetic cadences” found in Scripture, our recitation of texts that, in his words, “refuse to take the world as it seems to be.” This, he stated, is the primary purpose of faith.

My guess is that none of you had this definition on the very tip of your tongue as your own answer. Such is the oddness of a theologian's approach. How often do you – how often does anyone – set time aside to “practice poetic cadences”? Yet I hope very briefly this morning to give you reason to remember Brueggemann's reply and to want to hold to this yourself. I hope to give you reason enough to believe that such recitation is, in fact, the very center of faith, the kind of faith that can transform the entire world for the better.

This morning we have heard three readings from Scripture, and each in its own way gives credence to Brueggemann's claim. By pulling on several threads, his point may become all the clearer: faith begins by reading the Bible closely and listening attentively to its provocations.

What did Abraham see when he looked up into the night sky? Did he see something that we do not? They were the same stars and moon. They were no different. But Abraham saw more than these alone. He looked at the vast expanse of space, of lights twinkling against the darkness, and he saw there the strength of God that is not limited by our own fixed finiteness. We all know the resignation that Abraham felt. I'm old, he said. I'm tired. It's too late. There's nothing I can do. Time itself conspires against me. There are borders in our lives that are immovable. Just when we catch a glimpse of how grand life can be, just as quickly indignities – embarrassments and failures – can rudely remind us that we have feet of clay. This was Abraham's long lament, expressed over the many years he spent wandering and searching, expecting the promise of land and an heir that never seemed to come. Yet looking at the stars, as God directed, he saw there, too, his children, a nation, and the fulfillment of God's covenant with him. He saw this not by the measure of his own lights, but by the stars' testimony of God's unflagging beneficence. Abraham saw in them a fidelity that had no bottom, no endpoint, no place beyond the grace of God's creating. And this, he concluded, was the true world: not the world framed by his own limitations and all the anxieties that came with them, but the world determined by God's fathomless power for good, a power that was as individual as it was cosmic. This is what Abraham saw, and he refused to take the world as it seemed.

In the reading from the book of Hebrews, the writer describes people of faith as “strangers and foreigners on the earth,” people who are seeking “a different homeland.” What does this mean? Perhaps, most commonly, it has been taken as the declaration that heaven is better, that there exists another realm, removed from us, where all is in order and all is right, where God is unceasingly praised and where diaphanous saints eternally play golden harps – and actually enjoy it. Such a vision of heaven has been employed to suggest that death can be a welcome relief, an escape from the trials and evils of this world. Some day, we will all break the bonds of this brutish earth and arrive then, at long last, in a place more truly intimate with God, peaceful and bright.

But I’m not at all sure that this picture is right. It seems too small and not true to the text itself. For it may be that to be a stranger and foreigner on the earth means seeing this world and our own time in a different and uncommon light. It may mean always seeing the world first as God’s creation, to which God is unfailingly devoted. Heaven is not elsewhere, nor is it waiting off in the far distant future. No, heaven is contiguous with our life now. There is no rift between our world and God’s kingdom except for our own inability to allow God’s eternity to override our own deep sense of temporality and personal mortality.

The world we naturally know is the world we have defined by our own limitations. It is the world we have re-created on a smaller and tragic scale, where with resignation and despair and, sometimes, with prideful insistence we declare what is futile, what is final, and what, soon enough, will be forever lost. Faith, however, finds this world unduly claustrophobic. To have faith is to see all things exclusively through the judgment of God, and the world that then appears is the one that God has declared very good. It is the world that God has deemed worthy of infinite passion and boundless patience. It is the world that will not be abandoned, but will be redeemed, not as an expression of God’s pity but as the fulfillment of God’s love that, like creation, has no end and therefore no point of refusal.

To be a stranger and foreigner on earth, then, means acknowledging that heaven itself is being disclosed in our own lives, even when, all the while, we are prone to falling to fear and desperation and greed, convinced that the world is passing away, day by day. But Abel and Enoch and Noah and Abraham and Sarah desired “a better country”, “the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” They refused merely to take the world as it seemed.

And thus, Jesus advised in the Gospel to “stay awake.” For when we sleep the world dies, and thieves steal, and truth and beauty and goodness are diminished, and God seems absent to the point of irrelevance – no more than a wishful projection we cast up against our own nightmares. To be awake, however, is to be attuned to the possibility of seeing what is real and what endures. In place of our temptation to concede that life is short and finally comes to darkness, Jesus declared that we should be dressed for action with lamps lit, as people who believe that our time is a feast, served to us by God. Every day is reason for rejoicing without ever second-guessing what has been given. For what has arisen from out of God’s bottomless fidelity will be carried forward into an equally eternal reconciliation, in which nothing is lost. “The Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour” to accomplish the unexpected, to lift up and reclaim even what to us seems least desirable, the things that we dismiss with ease as worthless... God himself refuses to take the world as it seems.

Before all else, faith is the practice of reciting the poetic cadences of Scripture that refuse to take the world as it seems to be. Love is never provable. Hope is always mysterious. Mercy is destroyed when it must be explained in terms of its usefulness. The eternal can never be made obvious and demonstrable, or utterly prosaic. We cannot fully grasp God, because it is God who fully grasps us.

No simple prose can lay this out for examination and make God familiar; instead, poetic cadences surprise us, revealing a world that is always beyond the reach of our own measure. Abraham trusted this, and he was reckoned righteous. Abel, offered to God a sacrifice in keeping with God's own giving, and he was named righteous too. Jesus, who was condemned by all the authorities and executed, was raised as righteous above all, for his faith and obedience that refused to concede that death could not be conquered. Righteousness has almost nothing to do with morality. It is never earned. It only appears when our own lives reflect our trust in the poetic cadences of Scripture, when by faith we ourselves are re-situated within the great rhythms of grace, of God's infinite creating and redeeming. Such faith doesn't just dabble here and there in the concerns of the world. It changes everything. And this faith, poetic and majestic, deserves our practice.

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