

“Gotta Have Faith”

A couple of weeks ago we heard a passage from Genesis 18 about Abraham’s encounter with three angels one of whom turned out to be God. This week we hear a passage from Genesis 15 and the main human actor is called Abram. It is the same fellow but this is before he had his name changed by God in Genesis 17.

To recap back in chapter 12, the ancestral couple of Abram and Sarai had been called by God out of Haran where they had lived for some years. God 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.”

For Abram this must have been a promise too good to resist. He wasted no time in gathering up all of his possessions, his slaves, and the family of his brother’s son Lot. They journeyed into the Land of Canaan and sojourned there pitching their tents in several places and building altars to the Lord. Due to a famine they headed to Egypt. Their adventures continue there and then they return to Canaan where they encounter kings and a priest called Melchizedek from an unknown cult. They wage war to rescue Lot from invaders who had taken him captive.

After all of these trials and tribulations Abram has settled, as much as a nomad can, in Canaan. Over his time of sojourning he has accumulated money, flocks and herds, more slaves, and war booty. His name is known throughout the land for his military success, negotiations with kings and pharaoh, and the accumulation of wealth. However, he wonders how all of the families of the earth will be blessed through him if he does not have a biological heir. He is pleased with all that the Lord has bestowed upon him, but he bemoans, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." Since no child of his own has been born in his house it will be the child of a slave who inherits all that God has given him. Even in their old age what Abram and Sarai desire most is to have a child who will become their heritage.

God promises Abram that the slave child will not be his heir, but that he will have a child that will inherit all he has. Not only that, but his ancestors will be as numerous as the stars in the heavens. That had to seem impossible for an old man whose only wife was also well beyond childbearing years. Yet Abram believed him and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews latches onto Abram as an example of extreme faithfulness. The author says that faith is the assurance of things unseen. Certainly, Abram has not seen any of his own children. Neither has he seen an old man and an old woman procreate even once, much less so

that all of their ancestors would be as numerous as the stars in the heavens or sand on the shore.

Likewise, Jesus tells his small band of disciples that they are to have faith in something that is not readily apparent to them. In this case it is the Kingdom of God which is prepared for them. Instead of taking comfort in their possessions, the disciples are to sell all that they own and give the resulting money to the poor. As Abram trusted in God's promise of heirs, the disciples are to trust in God's promise of the reign of God on earth as it is in heaven. Therefore, they do not need possessions for God will provide for them.

These are all huge acts of faith which the dictionary calls a strong belief or trust, specifically in this case the belief in God. The writer of Hebrews says that Abram had faith because he determined that God was faithful. That is God was worthy of his faith because God keeps the promises God makes.

There is a sense of reciprocity here. God keeps faith with us and we keep faith with God. We have loyalty or duty to God because God is loyal to us. But this is where it can get sticky. For when we ask something of God we have to realize that God is not some cosmic Amazon Prime that sends what we ask for via two-day delivery. God does not work like that. God hears our prayers and pleas but is not a vending machine.

We have to recognize that the answers to our prayers are not so much what we want but what we need. Of course, we may not think they are what we need. We know that any good parent, and we call God Father and Mother, does not give their child everything they ask for. If they did they would be impoverished and their children would eat nothing but pizza and ice cream. We know that to raise a child requires parents and caretakers to make the best judgement for what the child needs. While we may think of ourselves as grownups with great self-control and wisdom, in the eyes of heaven we are but children. Why else would Jesus refer to the disciples as his "little flock"? He wants to remind them of their juvenile standing in the eyes of God.

Thus we have to hone our patience as Abram and Sarai did. We have to divest ourselves of needless things as the disciples did. We have to make ourselves purses that store not money but purses that store up our faith in God and God's faith in us. It is interesting that faith which seems so ephemeral compared to hard currency is actually the most reliable and bankable of all that we have. No matter what we have in possessions or spiritual gifts, if we do not have faith in God above we are actually bereft.

Abram and Sarai lived by faith and God reckoned it righteousness to them. Let us all follow their example that God also may reckon our faith righteousness to us.