

“The Joy of Lent: 3”

One of the funniest books I have ever read was written by the storyteller and observer of human foibles, Jean Shepherd. His childhood reminiscences were the basis for the movie “A Christmas Story.” The book that inspired the movie begins with a man returning to his hometown one snowy day. Before going to his family home he stops off in a nearby watering hole. As he is having a drink and chatting with the barkeep he notices the sign over the cash register. It reads, “In God we trust, all others pay cash.”¹

Trust in God is the theme of much of the Abraham and Sarah saga. Abram is first instructed by YHWH (יהוה) to go pack up all of his household goods, gather his servants and livestock and take his family from their home in Ur of the Chaldeans on a trek to a new and land unknown to them. Abram does not question this command from God. He does it completely based on his faith in and trust in the Lord. That is incredible. Imagine uprooting yourself and heading out to a destination unknown based on your perceived command from God. I think that could be a struggle for many of us. Abram being a man of deep and apparently unquestioning faith did as he was told.

This sojourn into the land of Canaan was not a short trip. Indeed, even when he arrives in Canaan. God takes Abram to a mountaintop so that he can survey all of the land that will belong to his descendants. But Abram is not allowed to stop for long. Their household travels to Egypt, then back into lower Canaan, then to do battle in another part of Canaan, and settles, as much as any nomad does, in an area called the Oak of Mamre in central Palestine south and west of Bethlehem and Jerusalem near modern-day Hebron.

Through all of this movement and transition Abram trusts in God’s direction. In today’s passage in Genesis 17 we see Abram’s trust challenged in two different ways. First, YHWH states, “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations.” This might seem to be an unlikely promise give that we have just learned that Abram is ninety-nine years old. We know from earlier in Genesis that Abram has no children. That age of ninety-nine is not the ideal for beginning a family. Furthermore, we know that Sarai is no spring chicken herself. She is in her seventies. Well beyond what scripture calls the way of women. That is, she is past menopause and unable to become pregnant. Abram could well wonder how he will be the ancestor of anyone much less nations.

The second act of trust that Abram enacts is accepting his name change. Abram has been called Abram for ninety-nine years and now God is changing his name. It is a slight change but a change nonetheless. The change is also significant. As Abram means “exalted father” while Abraham means “father of nations.” Sarai’s name change is also slight, just one letter but she goes from being “my princess” as Abram’s princess to Sarah which means simply “princess” as in the princess of all not just Abram. I suppose if God decided to change my name I could get used to it but it would take a while. I would

¹ This is the title of a book by Jean Shepherd.

wonder, as I expect Abraham did, why it was so important to make the name change. But once again Abram does not question God's commands but trusts that God has reasons for making.

The sign in the bar "In God we trust, all others pay cash" is amusing, but there is also an implicit challenge in it. Do we really trust in God? Ironically, while the phrase "In God We Trust" is stamped on our coins and printed on our paper currency, it seems to me that many more people trust in money, IRAs, stock portfolios and material goods more than they trust in God. Even among the faithful there is a focus on hoarding consumer and material goods. Having lots of stuff is like building a fortress around ourselves. Think how hard it is to give up one item to charity. It is like giving up part of our protection, one of the stones in the fortress wall. It is one thing to make a gift where we get something in return, think of how charitable organizations give gifts when you meet a certain donation amount. Even if you do not get a gift donating to public radio, the symphony, or the opera the gift guarantees that something you enjoy will continue to be available to you. Giving up something without getting something in return feels like a loss.

Learning to trust in God can be one of the joys of Lent. As Jesus says "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."² When we put our faith in God we realize we do not need to build fortresses around ourselves. We find freedom when greed and fear no longer motivate us. We will continue to save for a child's education, retirement or a rainy day, but we know that our savings are not the bedrock of our security. Rather we are secure in the promises of God. Even promises that seem as unlikely as those made to Abraham and Sarah.

Seek the Lord. Rebuild and strengthen your trust in God this Lent. God was our help in ages past and God is our only hope in years to come. All else will fail us, only God is true. To quote St. Paul wrote in Romans, "[Abraham] grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised."³

My sisters and brothers put your trust wholly in God. Free yourselves from the grifters, shysters and fear mongers who lurk on the internet, television and the telephone. Instead cultivate a life with one who loves you most. Don't let trust in God be only a slogan, make it the basis of your life. You will find a deep relationship with God pays dividends far beyond anything this world has to offer.

² Matthew 6:19-21 NRSV

³ Romans 20:20b-21 NRSV