

New Beginnings at Grace: The Journey of Faith
Genesis 18:1-15 and Romans 4:13-25
October 9, 2011

Suppose, for a second, that you are waiting to board a plane. It is very late and the plane has already been delayed two times. You are exhausted; emptied by the energy necessary for a demanding business trip or, perhaps, numb from having survived a painful funeral. A stranger strikes up a conversation with you, as is apt to happen when there is nothing left to do but wait. He's a chatty sort of fellow. It is a pleasant enough conversation until he asks 'so what line of business are you in?'

If you are me, you always approach that question with a little trepidation. You never know exactly what the reaction will be when you reply, "I'm a minister." In this instance, you don't receive the awkward silence, the embarrassed confession of how long it's been since he's been to church, or worse, the angry, painful tirade about life's cruel fate and God's apparent absence. Instead he responds, "I used to go to church but now I find that I need Sunday mornings to recover from the week. It is great to sleep in. To eat a leisurely breakfast. To read the NY Times cover to cover. I still believe in God, but I feel closer to God in nature. I'm a very spiritual person, I'm just not religious.

If there is one phrase that sums up modern religious sentiments it is this one: "I'm not religious, I'm spiritual." It is a phrase – and a life style choice – that expresses how the church hasn't met my needs and my biggest need is to feel close to God or at one with the world. And the "I'm not religious, I'm spiritual" stance is the choice of many, many people. We here in the church know it, if only in our bewilderment about our fading relevance and dwindling numbers. While a century ago the biggest competition for church members was the church down the street, today we lose people to kids' soccer games and Raven's tailgate parties, to once a week family breakfasts or the very simple decision to spend a morning in their pajamas. One Chicago scholar remarked the majority of people who aren't in church on Sunday are relaxing in the parks around Lake Michigan. The impulse for rest, for Sabbath, and for family is holy. And the church hasn't always lived up to its holy calling as a place for rest, community and sanctuary. But the idea that we might not need a community and a set of rules and God doesn't have any expectations of me other than a hope that I'm happy simply reflects deeply the individualistic, self-satisfying American brand of consumerism has seeped into our religious practices.

The biggest problem with the "I'm spiritual but not religious" approach to faith is how far it is from the Biblical witness. Take, for example, our great grandparents of faith, Abraham and Sarah. On the day Abraham sat outside his tent during the heat of the day, it had been over twenty years since God had first appeared to him and promised him land and offspring. He and Sarah had had twenty years of moving and hoping. Twenty years of waiting and wondering. They had left their home. They had changed their names. Abraham and his whole household had submitted to circumcision. And all these years later, they were still waiting, still holding their breath to see if the promise of God would come to be.

Walter Brueggemann reminds us that “the Bible regularly confesses more than it understands.” It claims, he suggests, “more than can ever be explained.”¹ Because at the center of our faith is this little, local miracle that a child would come to an old, barren couple. The whole story of God’s great plan for God’s people hinged upon this child, but as of that hot, sticky afternoon, when the air was so dry and still that you couldn’t summon the energy to move, the baby had not been born. God had made the promise. At that moment, “this frail old man and this fruitless woman,” said Brueggemann, “only had to look down at their hopeless, wrinkled bodies that had no vitality” and know that the promise would not come to be if they were left on their own.

But it was God who had made the promise. Within their long years of waiting, what Abraham and Sarah do get are regular appearances by God, who keeps showing up to remind them that the promise had not been forgotten. Sometimes God appeared as a voice calling from the twinkling night stars. Sometimes God came in the wind, howling through their tent, making sure they never became too settled with life as it was. Sometimes, the Lord himself appears. This time, God comes in during the worst part of the day, when absolutely nothing is happening, when all the energy was gone. “The Lord appeared to Abraham under the oaks of Mamre.” Abraham looked up, and there were three visitors whom he was eager to greet.

Now, in nomadic times, visitors were treasured guests. For people who lived in tents, trekking across the desert, other people were vital for simple survival. Visitors were treated well, because they brought companionship to otherwise isolated lives, supplies or physical assistance for tasks that needed many hands. The offer of water to wash, a chance to rest, a drink and some bread were standard practices. Water, rest, food: Let’s call them the basic courtesies extended to fellow human beings. The same gifts, hopefully, offered here on a Sunday morning.

But from the very beginning, there are clues that these are no ordinary visitors. Abraham is exceedingly hospitable, eager to host, deferential to a presence that signals a change in the wind. He turns a simple snack into a feast of freshly cooked lamb. The visitors, in turn, know much more than about them than any straightforward strangers. They ask after his wife, calling Sarah by name. They offer another reassurance of the promise – in due season, Sarah will conceive. They hear Sarah’s laughter outside the tent, even if they don’t actually hear it, accepting her disbelief and refuting it as well. “Oh yes, you did laugh. And the baby is coming despite your disbelief.”

It is a hard thing, writes Barbara Brown Taylor, to believe in a promise.² To trust the words that come from you know not exactly where, to see that promise written in the night sky, to hold it in your heart on the nights you cannot sleep. And the promise of a baby is a hard thing to hope for, to live for a blessing and a future without any sense of when it might come. “It is a hard thing to believe in a promise without any power to make it come true.”³ Abraham and Sarah are the grandparents of our faith; models of those reckoned as righteous, but they were also models of disbelief; persons who doubted, who laughed, who made alternate plans. They remind us that the life of faith is rarely comprised of how good it feels to hear God’s voice in the nighttime, but

¹ Walter Brueggemann, “A Demanding Long-Term Miracle” in *The Threat of Life: Sermons on Pain, Power and Weakness* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 4.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Late Bloomer” in *Gospel Medicine* (Boston: Cowley, 1995), 40.

³ Ibid.

what you do the next morning, and the morning after that, and how you welcome the stranger who shows up in your doorway. Faith has its pinnacle moments, its warm, fuzzy feelings but it is far more often a long-term commitment to a life you can only partially explain. To hold onto a promise without any power to make it come true.

At exactly this time of year, just as the leaves were starting to turn and the air was getting crisp, almost six years ago now, Chris and I welcomed our first child, our own hoped for baby. In the moments after Luke's birth, it was apparent that he was struggling to breathe. I will never forget handing him back to the nurse, watching them leave the room in a rush, waiting those long, awful minutes before learning things were under control but his heart had a tendency to beat too quickly. Luke would be fine but for now he would need medication, careful monitoring of his heart rate as his body had a chance to mature.

In the days and weeks after we brought Luke home, as we adjusted to his tachycardia, there was much I could do for my son. I could learn the rhythms of his medication, measuring out those tiny doses that increased with his weight. I could conquer my fear of all things medical and learn how to listen for his heartbeat, know what was normal and what was too fast. I could make all his doctor's appointments and even call for a second opinion. The one thing I could not do – the one thing I wanted to do the most – was heal his heart. Luke would eventually be just fine, but I've never forgotten that horrible, helpless feeling when the thing you want most desperately in the world is beyond your ability to make come true.

In those early weeks, when Chris would come home in the evenings, I would hand Luke over to him and take a walk to the park at the end of our street. As I walked I found myself thinking of the community we'd left behind when we moved to Nashville. I had been for six years the associate minister at Metropolitan Memorial, a church with which I had been an exceptionally good fit. We had left behind a rich community, where I had been blessed to be part of so many faithful lives. As I circled the little walking trail of the park, I thought about sitting in the rocking chair beside a mom cradling her premature baby who now needed a spinal tap and watching the tears splash down her face. I thought about sitting in my office with a couple whose young adult son had just come out to them as a gay man the week before, who said with such intensity, we're surprised, we're confused but all we really care about right now is how much we love our son and how much we want to do well right now as his parents. I thought about the hard, lonely look of grief on a widower who sat all alone in the front row at his wife's funeral. It had been a long death many years in the making, there had been no children and he was all alone in that long, long pew. Just as the service began, an usher, who had gotten there early, opened all the doors and greeted all the mourners, quietly made his way down the side aisle to slide into the pew beside him.

With each memory, I missed that community but I also felt like every one of them was whispering to me. Welcome to parenthood. Welcome to the human condition, where your heart lives in the people that you love and the dreams you hope for, where there is so much you cannot control. Remember, though, you are never, ever alone and you are never, ever outside the promises of God. Which is why I think it is significant that when God showed up by the oaks of Mamre God came as three persons. None of us can believe in the promise all by ourselves. None of us can trust that which is yet to come true all on our own. We need each other. Faith flourishes

best when we have a community, in which we together repeat the promises, together draw strength when the wait gets too long and together watch for signs that God is in our midst.

Generations after Abraham, Paul reminds us that the promise given to our ancestors is the same one available also to us. Paul summarizes that promise as the stunning miracle of a God “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.” This is our God, the one who gives life to the dead. This is our God, who offers a future to those who think every door is closed. This is our God, who is able to bring to be that which just a moment ago did not exist. And in the presence of that God the decision rests upon us. Do we live just in our puny, tired little dreams? Do we abandon ourselves to conventional lives where miracles aren't possible? Do we remain satisfied with a timid faith in a tiny God? Or do we watch together for the next divine visit, hoping against hope in the God who says nothing is too wondrous for me?