

Lent II (A)
Genesis 11.31-12.9; Psalm 121Romans 4/1-5, 13-17; John 3.1-17
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
17 February 2008

Are We There Yet?

~Paul H. Friesen~

'Are we there yet?' Our family drove to another province last summer without four-year old in the back seat. So this question was called out to us (in the front seat) with various words and sometimes even without words. She really wanted to arrive at wherever it was we said we were going, to get out of her seat and safety harness and stop passing rocks and trees and forks in the road. But she only really arrived once in Papa's driveway. The rest of the trip was, well, a very long journey.

On this second Sunday of Lent, our Scriptures challenge us to think not just about our spiritual destination, but about the spiritual journey we are all on—whether or not we were willing to admit we are on a spiritual journey. It is natural to hope (when so much in our lives is constantly changing) that our faith and worship—and our whole Christian life—will serve us best as an unchanging place of refuge, a safe haven, and an anchor in the middle of the constant changes and challenges that come to us between Sundays.

It is easy to believe this, but it would be a pity if we saw our personal faith and our parish worship *only* as a safe arrival at the end of a dangerous journey.

Of course, the language of faith often describes God, the unchanging Divine Trinity, as our rock, our strong fortress. And it is God's safe and silent green pastures and cool waters, and the calm voice of the divine shepherd that we all long for at hard points or during the unsettled periods of our lives. And in the mercy of God, we all have known what it is to experience God's calm voice, and God's undisturbed pastures.

But Christians confess God was incarnate for us in the person Jesus Christ, whose whole life was a human journey. It is this whole-life journey we celebrate it week by week in the Creed, and in the stories seen in the glass that surrounds us while we worship. It is this holy journey—this spiritual pilgrimage—that is marked out for us to follow. It is marked out by Jesus who said to his first disciples: 'Take up your cross and follow me'. 'Follow me'. We can't really follow anyone if we don't know we're on a journey.

So today we're not thinking about the resting places on our spiritual journey, as important as they are, but on the meaning of what happens in between the resting places.

‘What happens in between’...well, this is how all of us spend most of our time—and this is true whether or not we like to see our life as a journey, with all the uncertainties and surprises of every journey.

Nicodemus, whose story we have just heard, was not keen on anything changing. He became disturbed, in fact, when Jesus spoke about spiritual enlightenment as being ‘born again’—or being born ‘from above’ (depending on your English translation). The pain of one life was enough for Nicodemus—he did not want to have to live through any sort of second life.

And he wasn’t keen on Jesus’ words about God’s spirit being like the wind, whose origin and destination is not obvious. He thought he had already arrived at the knowledge of a God who could be predicted. Nicodemus was a whole lot like us. (But we have just had a fine sermon on Nicodemus at our Advent evensong...)

So we should remind ourselves that we are told many times in the Scriptures that Abraham is a lot like us too. But, to be honest, this seems a little hard to swallow when you first think about it.

The story in *Genesis* of Abraham comes to us from, perhaps, 4000 or 3500 years ago amidst the ziggurats of Mesopotamia, ancient Iran and Iraq, the birth-place of human civilization. And in the 2000 year-old book of *Romans* this ancient story of Abraham is interpreted for Christians by a Jewish rabbi, Saul of Tarsus who had become the Apostle Paul. How could any of this possibly help us this morning? It’s all, well, so very, very old —so distant from us.

Well, the short answer is that if we in fact *confess the God whom we say we confess*, then our faith, *our pilgrimage, must be connected somehow to the faith journey, the pilgrimage, of our ancestors in the faith*. They are the ones who handed on the Faith to us. Thank God, we didn’t dream it all up!

But we need the long answer too—about the usefulness of Abraham’s journey to us. So let’s see just how Abraham’s life can help us by thinking through the Scriptures about this extraordinary ancestor of ours.

To put it briefly:

In the story in Genesis, Abraham and all his descendants are offered God’s pure promise of a blessed journey through life.

In the passage in Romans, Abraham and all his descendants learn to take up the promise by travelling in faith.

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Why did God offer Abraham the journey, the life, he offered him?

Why did God say to Abraham, and not someone else, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you?’ Was Abraham exceptionally spiritual? Did he possess the qualities that God wanted in a man of faith? To be a little ridiculous: Did God look over the *resumes* of leading Mesopotamians circa 2000 b.c. and short-list Abraham, and then give him the job?

A preacher could invent a worthy, commendable super-spiritual Abraham. But the truth is that if Abraham had special qualities, we aren’t told. As far as we can tell, when Abraham and his family were called by God to leave the great city of Ur in Mesopotamia they were nomadic shepherds on the fringes of society who worshipped the same violent and lusty gods as everyone else. It took them years to leave behind the city of Ur and make their way north, past Babylon, and along the fertile river valley of the Euphrates to Haran in present day Turkey. And it was only then, after some time, that Abraham heard the call to go further and make his way south into present-day Israel.

It wasn’t Abraham’s qualities that obligated God to call him. Generations later, as Joshua, Moses’ successor stood in the promised land, Joshua said to the Israelites: ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. Then *I took your father Abraham* from beyond the River and led them through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many.’¹

What a promise God made! This insignificant nomad who had skirted the great cities of civilization was to become the father of a great nation in a new land. Rabbi Jon Levenson said a couple of years ago: ‘In Genesis 12 these extraordinary promises come like a bolt from the blue, an act of God’s grace alone; no indication has been given as to why or even whether Abram merits them.’²

How right he is! *Abraham’s offer of a blessed life’s journey, like ours, is a pure gift of God, a pure promise.*

But there’s an important detail it would be easy to miss. ‘I will bless you,’ says the Lord to Abraham, ‘so that you will be a blessing...and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’ And then the Lord told him to ‘hit the road.’

The whole point of the life Abraham was offered, the journey he was sent on was not only to find a true home, to become fruitful. His pilgrimage was to bless, as it is put ‘all the families of the earth.’ Its not just our journey, for us. Its for the good of everyone around us.

¹ *Joshua* 24.2-3. All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* unless noted otherwise.

² In *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: O.U.P., 2004), p.30.

How much time do we waste, at least some of the time, trying to figure out why we have been given the life we have? How much time do we waste wishing we had someone else's life? How many times do we say 'no', when we are offered the kind of journey that Abraham was offered?

In fact, God chooses us all for the spiritual journey we have, and offers it to each of us—but not because of our *resumes*. It is when we accept our journey as a pure gift from God—it is only when we see the gift not only as good for us but for those whom we will bless on our journeys, that we will be happy.

Then we will accept the journey, and enjoy its stages.

In the passage in Romans, Abraham and all his descendants learn to take up the promise by travelling in faith.

Acceptance of God's gift, and travelling in faith are connected. This is what the Apostle Paul said about Abraham's journey: 'It depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest of grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants...to those who share the faith of Abraham.'

The promise God made of bringing each of us to our spiritual destination is enjoyed by accepting it in faith. We are asked to trust God, to trust God that the spiritual journey of our life is going somewhere, and that its stages all have a meaning.

If we read the stories of Abraham we will hear about all kinds of humdrum things, about tragedies, about sins and bad decisions, and about joys—about all the stages of Abraham's journey to the Promised Land. They all have value, then all had meaning because they were steps toward God's promise. Abraham believed this—this is faith.

We're often told today to believe as if we were supposed to have 'faith in faith', as if we were supposed to be optimistic for no particular reason. We are all supposed to hope that we too can become rich or famous or enviable...or at least completely safe, totally insured, freed up from unpleasant surprises. Abraham's faith was in the God who made him and loved him and would lead him on his journey—this is the faith that St. Paul urges us to have.

So what is the promise? The promise is not for Christians something rooted to a distant land on earth. It is, however, the promise of deep communion with God, of deep friendship with God—and a deep connection to our fellow human beings.

This is what we are asked to believe—this is the Gospel. To live in faith is to accept this promise from God, to live the life God has given us. As the Apostle puts it: we trust God, we 'trust him who justifies the ungodly.' Salvation, in this life and the next is a gift. To have faith is to accept it with two hands.

How do we bless the world, as Abraham did by accepting the journey God had given him. We do it by extending the promise of Christ's birth, life, death and resurrection to everyone, in our words and in our life. We do it by offering fellowship to all who come to worship. We do it by offering food and friendship to all who come in to our parish buildings, and around them, and all who we meet up with.

The promise of God is that we will be brought home into his deep fellowship at the end of life—but long before that God's promise is that we can enjoy communion with God and each other. This is the Gospel. We can enjoy the forgiveness of sins that have broken fellowship and friendship.

We can accept reverses in career, and limitations of money, and ill health as hard stages of a journey that have meaning because our lives are the lives God has given us. This will mean we might argue with God, as Abraham did. This will mean still feeling the weight of all the things that seem to go wrong. But if we travel in faith, we know that everything on our journey has God's divine blessing as an opportunity to draw us into deeper communion with each other, and with God.

The ancient story of Abraham—and the Apostle's Paul's story about Abraham—offer us two things: *God's pure promise of a blessed journey through life* and the blessings that come from *accepting the promise, by travelling with faith in God, the one who gives us the journey we have been given*. Are we there yet? No! But that's okay. And until we arrive, we have the journey.