

Lent 2, Yr. C,
March 17, 2019
Genesis 15: 1-12, Luke 13:31-35

Today's scriptures invite us to think about TRUST. It's front and center in both the Genesis and the Luke readings. In the Genesis reading, the word that's central is "believed" – Abraham believed the Lord. But that word can also be translated as trust. The need to trust is part of being human, but so is the temptation to DISTrust. Luther felt that, at bottom, the sin of Adam and Eve was mistrust. The theologian H. Richard Niebuhr, in commenting on this, said that distrust seems to be our first stance. One can wonder why that's true: perhaps it's our fragility, so we know how careful we have to be; perhaps we've been betrayed or let down too many times. Whatever is behind this, I think we would agree that trusting is difficult.

Let's look first at the Genesis reading. You'll remember that Abraham was not an Israelite but was from Ur of the Chaldeans. Before this passage, there's another in which God speaks to Abraham and calls him to leave his homeland and go to a land that God will show him. Not to some certain and described place, but to a land that God will show him. So, on that basis of the promise that God would make of him a great nation, Abraham picks up and goes. He has many setbacks along the way and many moments of backsliding and mistrust. He himself puts the promise in jeopardy. For instance, when he and Sarah are in Egypt, Abraham fears that the Pharaoh will desire Sarah, who is very beautiful, and will think that Abraham is in the way. So to save his own skin, Abraham tells Sarah to pretend that she's his sister. So Sarah ends up, at least for a while, as a part of Pharaoh's harem. And then later, when Abraham and Lot's shepherds quarrel over land, without giving a thought to what God's intent was in all this, Abraham lets Lot pick a separate (and the best) part of the land for his own possession.

In the beginning, the promise of God had been the land and an heir – a family so that the land could be possessed in perpetuity. But neither of these promises has been fulfilled. So, where we come in today, God has again appeared to Abraham and God renews the promise. LOOK TOWARD HEAVEN AND COUNT THE STARS, God says. SO SHALL YOUR DESCENDENTS BE. And the text says that ABRAHAM BELIEVED THE LORD AND THE LORD RECKONED IT TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS. That's the line that gets quoted when people talk about Abraham as our father in faith. But if you look at the text and the history I've sketched, you'll see that Abraham's faith isn't passive and it isn't simple. Abraham had heard and acted on God's promise, but now he raises some questions: LORD GOD, WHAT WILL YOU GIVE ME, FOR I CONTINUE CHILDLESS. And then, YOU HAVE GIVEN ME NO OFFSPRING. And then, after the promises of land, Abraham raises another question: O LORD GOD, HOW AM I TO KNOW THAT I SHALL POSSESS IT? Then there's that passage about the smoking fire pot passing between the cut-up halves of animals. Scholars of that period say that that was the way covenants were sealed. It's a way of saying: may this happen to me if I break our agreement.

Let's look at Abraham more closely. Abraham had no scriptures and no temple, so his faith and trust had little to do with theological ideas. It was, instead, some kind of primal awareness of God and then an attitude of trust, knowing that God would be God and could be trusted. But it

wasn't easy. It wasn't a matter of God spoke, Abraham obeyed, God promised and it immediately happened. Abraham's faith had moments of absolute trust, moments of clarity, times of obedience, but also moments of doubt, questioning, anxiety, haggling. Like this scripture in which Abraham is saying: WAIT A MINUTE; I HAVE A QUESTION. IT'S NOT AT ALL CLEAR TO ME HOW YOU ARE GOING TO WORK THIS OUT. I'D LIKE MORE INFORMATION!

And yet, in the end, this family, landless and barren, relied on the promises of God, not because there was concrete evidence, but because God was the one who was promising.

One of the primary ways of looking at the story is by thinking about how impossible it was for this aged couple to have a child. Tradition says that Abraham was 100 and Sarah 90 when Isaac was born. So at the time of this conversation, the mood was one of despair and hopelessness. And yet, they were invited to trust that God could do the impossible. That God could truly do something new. Elsewhere in the text it says that Sarah laughed when she heard that she was going to have a child. Fell down laughing, I believe it says. And when God asked her if she was laughing, she denied it, as I suppose one would do. Someone has suggested that she was laughing at the image of giving birth in the geriatric ward, knowing that Medicare would have to pick up the tab. But, I'm sure, laughing at the impossibility of it all. And then God tells them to name the child Isaac, which means Laughter.

And those ideas of trust and laughter tie into the Gospel reading as well. Jesus is heading to Jerusalem, which he characterizes as the place where prophets are killed. He's been bucking the political and religious systems, he's crossed the lines of power and he knows what that will mean. He talks about Herod as a fox and himself as a hen gathering her brood under her protective wings. If you were a betting man or woman, would you have put your money on Herod or Jesus at that point? Barbara Brown Taylor, commenting on this passage says, Herod has soldiers, Jesus has disciples and rather hapless ones at that. Herod kills, Jesus prays. She said she was once in Israel where this was supposed to have taken place and on the altar was not a hen, but a rooster. I remember seeing roosters in yards in HI and being told they were fighting cocks which I understand can be ferocious. Maybe they can stand up to a fox, but a brooding hen? Did Jesus have doubts about how this would all turn out? I'm sure the human part of him did. But he trusted and continued on his course: I'm continuing my work today and tomorrow, he says. And, with Jesus, God again did what we would have considered the impossible, raising him from the dead. With the last word being a word of life and love, Jesus coming out from the grave with what's been called joyous EASTER LAUGHTER.

What does all this say to us? In the midst of what can seem like a barren and hopeless world, when we can't see that things can possibly be turned around, we can remember that God is still in charge and that God can do what we consider impossible. That through God, light can break into the world, the kind of light that no darkness can overcome. The challenge for us is to trust that light and to live in accordance with that vision, even when we have no concrete evidence, but trusting that God will be God and that Easter joy and laughter will triumph in the end.

Two stories. I don't know which Indiana Jones movie it was where he had to cross a chasm and was challenged to just step out into space and a bridge would appear. And it did, not all at

once, but piece by piece, appearing as he walked. And, of course, being Indiana Jones, he made it to the other side. But each step had to be taken in trust. The other story is different and true. It's about a German soldier in WWII. An ordinary fellow who was drafted into Hitler's army, doing what he understood to be his duty. His name was Joseph Schultz. One day, an officer gathered a group of 6 soldiers. They were to follow him. They thought it was a routine patrol, but when they came over the top of a hill, they understood otherwise. Waiting there was a group of Yugoslavian civilians, 5 men and three women. The soldiers were ordered to line up and were given the command. READY. AIM. And then, in the silence that followed, there was the sound of a rifle butt hitting the ground. Everything stopped while Private Joseph Schultz walked toward the Yugoslavians and joined hands with them. When the command to fire was given, he died along with the others. Found on his body was a passage from St. Paul: LOVE DOES NOT DELIGHT IN EVIL, BUT REJOICES IN THE TRUTH. LOVE ALWAYS PROTECTS, ALWAYS TRUSTS, ALWAYS HOPES, ALWAYS PERSEVERES. Like Abraham, like Jesus, this man had a relationship with God in which trust was the operative factor – no evidence, no special assurance, just trust that God would be faithful and that he would ultimately participate in that joyful Easter laughter. As will we. Amen.