

5A 2023

Today we hear three stories about faith, two concerning Abraham, and one about the faith of the leader of a synagogue and of an unknown woman in the street.

Taken together, these stories show us what it means to be a person of faith, which is another Christian concept that seems to get turned into anything and everything but what it is in order to avoid it.

Some measure their faith by the degree of absurdity of the things in which they believe.

The more farfetched, the greater their faith.

In reality, faith is simply about trust.

Let's start with Abraham.

When he is an old man with no children, God promises him that he will be the father of a nation.

Sarah scoffs at this, but Abraham believes.

He trusts God enough, in fact, to leave his home and everything he knows and travel far away to the land of Canaan in preparation.

In Abraham, we see the movement of faith in a person's life.

First, there is a sense of being called to do something.

Before faith can have any effect, in other words, we must trust that voice within our hearts, where God speaks to us.

We must not rationalize it away as some stray thought, but trust that we were created specifically so that we can sense God's voice.

There are, of course, many other voices seeking to compete, to control us (to gain our vote, our money, our attention), and they will work hard to alienate us from this sacred voice, to make us deaf to our own hearts, so that they can replace it with their own voices in our heads.

AA has many great sayings.

Among them is "Don't rent other people space in your head."

Many try to get into our heads by flooding us with logic.

"Abraham, you and Sarah are much too old to bear children. Are you crazy?"

The interesting thing about logic is that a perfectly logical conclusion can be reached from a perfectly absurd assumption.

Logic is not about truth, in other words, but process.

If we start with false assumptions, we end up with false conclusions—garbage in, garbage out, as they say in the computer world.

If we want to be fancy, we can say, soundness implies validity, but validity does not imply soundness.

Personally, I like "garbage in, garbage out" better.

Some people, on the other hand, will throw science at us.

“That voice is your imagination.”

“It’s just neurons firing.”

“It means nothing.”

Rupert Sheldrake wrote, “It’s almost as if science said, ‘Give me one free miracle, and from there the entire thing will proceed with a seamless, causal explanation.’ The one free miracle was the sudden appearance of all the matter and energy in the universe, with all the laws that govern it.”¹

We have ways, in other words, of letting our reason blind us.

We say that we have explained creation, but we actually have only removed the question one step.

We know that the universe started with a big bang, but where did the stuff that went bang come from (along with the rules governing it)?

People also will try to *frighten* us into submission.

“Do you really think the people of Canaan are just going to let you settle there? They will kill you!”

Fear is used to hold our attention and keep us distracted from anything that might challenge someone else’s authority.

1 Rupert Sheldrake, *The Science Delusion: Freeing the Spirit of Enquiry*.

When someone is trying to frighten us, we must ask ourselves, “What is it he does not want me to see?”

People also will try to instill anxiety (which is less specific than fear).

“You can’t begin again at this age. You’re bound to fail somehow!”

They do not want to listen to God’s voice, so they do not want us to listen, either.

I’ve seen marriages fall apart because one member decided to do something to improve her life and the other member preferred lethargy.

The first was not insisting that the other join in, but just seeing her take positive steps was too much to bear.

In contrast with all these exterior voices that try to get into our heads, there is a voice inside of us all along.

We recognize it to be the voice of God (and not some other voice that we have allowed to rent space) when it is accompanied by a profound sense of peace that transcends all worldly concerns.

Sometimes, our choice is between being “reasonable,” “sensible,” “practical,” and following God, who knows best.

Why did God move Abraham to Canaan to start a nation?

Maybe because, had he done so in his home area, it was they who would have stopped him.

Why did the GPS take us down this road rather than the one “I always take”?

Maybe there was an accident on that road.

By the way, if you want to ride with me, the rule is, don’t question the GPS.

(People like Sarah hate not being in control at all times, or, more accurately, hate not feeling like they are in control.)

God brings us to places no amount of reason could predict.

The peace in our hearts is the guide.

We can trust it.

Abraham feels led to move to Canaan and trusts that voice in his heart.

This trust then leads to action, the second movement of faith.

Once that action is complete, however, we have not reached full completion.

It can be some time before results are apparent or further steps are revealed.

Abraham does not despair, but waits patiently—the third action.

Sarah, on the other hand, complains and tries to take matters into her own hands.

When Sarah’s handmaiden Hagar bears Ishmael, Abraham’s firstborn son, for example,

Sarah fears that Hagar will usurp her position as matriarch of the nation that she did not really trust was ever going to be.

The use of logic is very opportunistic.

She tries to rid herself of Hagar and Ishmael, but God protects them both.

Because Abraham does not resist Sarah's actions, however, God worries that he cannot be trusted.

God therefore tests Abraham's resolve in the famous story of the near sacrifice of Isaac.

God is wondering, in other words, whether Abraham actually has what it takes to carry out God's plan.

If he does, God reasons, then he will not stop at the idea of sacrificing the son who is the key to the great nation.

When the time comes, Abraham leads Isaac up the mountain, certain that God will work it out one way or another, and, once God is convinced of Abraham's trust, God provides an alternate sacrifice.

Isaac then spends the rest of his life in therapy, but he does eventually bear children from whom the Jewish nation flows.

Paul later uses the story of Abraham to explain to the Romans that faith is more important to our spiritual growth than merely following the rules.

God deemed Abraham righteous, in other words, not because he followed all the rules, but because he trusted God.

As Joan Chittister pithily explains, God wants evolution, not revolution.²

We are to grow in relationship with others, not to make the world in our image, as Sarah tried to do.

Similarly, in the gospel pericope that is proclaimed today, two faithful people are healed.

Notice that Jesus never says, “I heal you.”

He says to the stranger, “Take heart, daughter; *your faith* has made you well.”

She felt God move her to touch Jesus’ garment, even though it was strictly forbidden for a woman to touch a rabbi.

Though it was an unreasonable act, she sensed with peace in her heart that it was the right approach, acted, and then trusted that all would be well.

As a result, Jesus does not scold her, and she is indeed healed.

Jesus then continues to the house of the leader of the synagogue, who, as a member of the establishment, also transgresses boundaries by approaching Jesus for help.

When we love God or others, we are unconcerned about what people think.

Once at the leader’s house, undaunted by the laughter of those outside, Jesus raises the leader’s daughter from the dead.

So what do we learn about the nature of faith from these stories?

² Joan Chittister, *The Gift of Years*, p. 85.

Faith means to trust *sufficiently to act and to wait patiently*.

We therefore pray to God in the collect today to “grant that by your inspiration we may think those things that are right, and by your merciful guide may do them.”

We have faith in God that, in the long run, everything is working out according to God’s plan.

Meanwhile, we recognize that God never promised a direct path.

There will be twists and turns and bumps in the road.

We may end up in Canaan.

Amen.