

Sermon: C Proper 14 2016  
St. Augustine's-in-the-Woods  
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Luke 12:32-40  
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16  
Genesis 15:1-6  
Psalm 33:12-22

“No matter where you are on your [faith] journey, you are welcome here.” That’s what that great sign says out front and it says a lot.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews defines faith as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen”--as good a definition as we will find anywhere; “faith” is difficult to pin down. Faith happens to us and in us and keeps moving around and changing as we mature or regress, as we become more or less in tune with God. Faith grows out of experiences we’ve had with God that inform our present, but even more, lead us to hope for an even better future.

Years ago I led a Lenten program on faith as journey, asking participants to illustrate their journeys on paper. Several did time-lines with encounters with God noted; one did stepping stones; another produced a lovely illustration of a sunrise with the crayons provided; one man drew a star with his name on it with a straight line directly to God. When I asked him about it he said that ever since he knew God loved him his faith had never varied; he had never doubted, never questioned, and never would. Frankly, his account made me nervous. Most faith journeys involve wondering and a bit of wandering--mine, for sure!

The scriptural story of faith begins with the call of Abraham who, if you recall, had his perfectly good life and future interrupted by the voice of God that invited him to pull up stakes and journey to a place promised, but unknown. God was the initiator and the promiser of better things including a successful family whom God would claim as God’s own people. Abraham’s “yes” to God initiated a covenant relationship based on faith: In it God would be faithful to Abraham and the chosen people and Abraham would be faithful to God. Abraham and Sarah journeyed to the Promised Land, claimed it, settled it a bit, their flocks increased, but years went by and no baby came. Giving up the hope of an heir, Abraham made other plans, but God spoke again, this time announcing that Abraham and Sarah, both of great age, would be blessed with a son whose offspring would outnumber the stars in the sky. Incredible as the message was, Abraham went along with it! God was pleased with Abraham’s continued faith in what God had in store. Sure enough, Isaac was born!

The most important thing to note about this marvelous story is that the relationship with Abraham was initiated entirely by God, offered as a gift to Abraham who valued it mostly, but gave up on it sometimes. Abraham never had to earn God's love or always do the right thing to remain in the covenant relationship. God's love for Abraham and his progeny was GRACE, the love of God, never earned, but given. God's faithfulness endures; ours wavers.

The story of Abraham must have made a huge impression on me at a early age. When I was 8 my family moved from an apartment to a house. I was the new kid in school and the promised dog had not yet been acquired. Both of my parents worked so I was home alone one afternoon, playing with paper dolls [I know, that dates me!] on the living room floor. Sunshine streamed in. Suddenly, I knew I was not alone even though no other person was in the house. I was not afraid and knew, somehow, that God was there with me, loving me in all that sunshine. The feeling has never ever left me! I remember thinking that I must be just like Abraham! What I didn't realize then was that the encounter was just the beginning of what would be my lifelong journey of faith with God, a gift of immeasurable value with a fair amount of wandering along the way.

You have had encounters with God, too, or you wouldn't be here today. Conversion experiences are more common than we think and happen in all sorts of different ways--not always dramatic, more like a creeping awareness that something important has happened. It is a good thing to think about them and talk about them, especially when God seems to have been absent for awhile, a long while sometimes. The thing is, such encounters are always initiated by God and nearly always take us by surprise. Jesus comes to us--that is always the way conversion begins--and if our hearts are open, we receive him. Always grace; always God's gift.

Can't you just hear God's voice blessing Abraham and Sarah with the promise of a child when Jesus says to his disciples "Do not be afraid, little flock for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." God's kingdom, God's reign! Here? Now? Whidbey Island? What a gift!

Jesus does say we should prepare a bit for God to come around so we're ready to receive God when God comes. Jesus advises getting rid of excess stuff so attachment to belongings won't get in the way of opening our hearts. He says "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." If your life's focus is on your checkbook, it will be all the more difficult to open yourself to God when God shows up. Jesus then goes on to talk about being ready in ways

that don't make much sense to us since we don't light lamps with oil and don't have servants around to get everything ready for divine visitors. Being alert all the time gives me a bit of trouble, too, because it sounds like having to expect a hurricane or an earthquake every moment of every day--wearying, if not impossible. It is also not about the bumper-sticker I saw that said "Jesus is coming. Look busy!"

So I think we need to hear Jesus' advice in another way: What he is saying is that God's gifts always come so we should try to position ourselves to be surprised--anywhere, anytime--for Jesus himself will come calling in your life when you least expect it. When God comes, say "yes" like Abraham did and your journey of faith will continue and even more wonderful surprises will follow.