

## “Fighting Tigers in the Dark.”

**A**braham Maslow (1908-1970) was an American psychologist who developed an unique understanding of basic human needs. He’s best remembered for arranging them according to those which one seeks first, and then those which one seeks second, and so forth. That arrangement is known as “Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs.”

According to Maslow, when a person has all of their basic needs met, they reach an emotional state where there is no anxiety, only peace. However, when those needs are not met, one’s life may be described as uncertain or insecure, and perhaps even fearful and anxious.

I mention Maslow and his Hierarch of Needs because of something that happened several chapters before our reading this morning from Genesis seventeen. In the twelfth chapter of Genesis, God made three promises to Abraham.

God’s first promise was: “I will make you into a great nation.” I interpret this to be the promise of *substance*; that is, everything necessary for life. This is the “daily bread” we ask for in the Lord’s Prayer.

God’s second promise was: “I will make your name great.” I interpret this to be the promise of *respect* among one’s peers.

The third promise was: “I’ll bless those who bless you; curse those who curse you.” And I interpret this to be a promise of the *power* to influence the people and events around you; it’s a promise that your life can have meaning and purpose; a promise that your life can make a difference.

So, God promised to give Abraham substance, respect, and power. And because of that, Abraham was willing to “hitch his wagon” to that star whose name was God.

And thousands of years later, you and I can resonate with this ancient story, because those are three things that each of us want as well: substance, respect, and power.

It's worth noting that Abraham was seventy-five years old when God first made those promises in Genesis 12. However, in our reading this morning from Genesis 17, when God reaffirms those promises, Abraham is ninety-nine years old. Twenty-four years have passed since the promise was first given; for twenty-four years Abraham has waited for God to do what he said he would do! And in the seventeenth chapter of Genesis, which we just heard a few minutes ago, Abraham is still waiting, and waiting faithfully. Reading this, I can't help but wonder if I'm not, sometimes, a bit too impatient with God.

Now, if we were to jump ahead from Abraham's time, say about a thousand or more years, we would find ourselves in the time-frame of today's gospel.

In Mark's gospel, and just *before* that portion we heard this morning, Jesus had asked his disciples "Who do you say I am?" and Peter responded "You are the Christ."

Now, keeping in mind the promises God made to Abraham, I am willing to bet that, in Peter's mind, he might very well define "the Christ" as that person who gives his followers substance, respect, and power. In other words, and from Peter's way of thinking, "the Christ" was that person who would help him satisfy his hierarchy of needs. And, since he believes that Jesus can provide these things for him, Peter is willing to "hitch *his* wagon" to that star whose name is "Jesus."

Now we have enough background information to begin looking at today's gospel.

Just as Abraham had certain expectations of God, Peter has the same expectations of Jesus: that here is someone who can help me meet my needs, and satisfy my desires. However, *does* Jesus make the same promises to Peter, that God made to Abraham? What did he say in today's gospel? In paraphrase, it's this:

"Then Jesus began to teach them that he – Jesus – must undergo great suffering, and be rejected, and be killed."

And then, Jesus says,

"If any want to become my followers, let them likewise deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

If you think it was tough for Abraham to have to wait twenty-four years to get what he wanted and needed, think of how Peter must have felt when he heard those doom-and-gloom predictions from Jesus.

It's no wonder that Peter took exception to Jesus' words, and began to rebuke him. For, rather than promising substance, respect and power, Jesus seemed to be offering the exact opposite.

In retrospect, however, I have to wonder if this horror-story-of-a-life is really what Jesus was offering. It seems so, but I suspect there's more to it. And so I'm left to wonder: What are these stories telling me?

To answer that question, we have to look to another book of the Bible. In the book of Hebrews, we find these words:

“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for, and being certain of what we do not see.” (11:1)

In other words, faith doesn't come into play when I *get* what I want or need. Rather, faith comes into play, when I have to *wait* for what I want and need. Faith comes into play when I am in need, because faith gives me the courage, and the patience, and the hope to hang in there with that Someone, in whose nature and character I have chosen to trust. And so faith, I realize, isn't *hoping* to hear God say, “Don't worry. Everything will be alright.” Rather, faith *is being willing* to hear God say, “Don't worry. I'll be there with you, even though things have gone terribly wrong.”

Of course, we all want the things that Abraham and Peter wanted. We'd all *like* to hear God say to us:

“I'll make you into a great nation” (*i.e.*, give us the gift of substance). Or,

“I'll make your name great” (*i.e.*, give us the gift of respect). Or,

“I'll bless those who bless you, and curse those who curse you” (*i.e.*, give us the gift of power).

However, and if our reading from Genesis is any indication, even if God *did* make those promises to us, many of us, like Abraham, might have to wait many, many years to see those promises fulfilled.

And so, the question remains, What do we do until then? Perhaps simply remember that *faith* is still operative. And remember that Jesus did say to us:

“I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. For the heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself” (Matthew 6:25 ff).

I conclude this morning, by telling you a story, which was presented to me as being true.

Several years ago there was a well-known television circus show that developed a Bengal tiger act.

Like the rest of the show, it was performed “live” before a large studio audience.

One evening, the tiger trainer went into the cage with several tigers to do a routine performance. As usual, the door to the cage was locked behind him.

The studio spotlights highlighted the cage, the television cameras moved in close, and the audience watched in suspense as the trainer skillfully put the tigers through their paces.

However, in the middle of the performance, the worst possible thing happened: all of the studio lights went out!

And for twenty or thirty long, dark seconds the trainer was locked in that cage with the tigers. In the darkness they could still see him, but he could not see them.

A whip and a small chair seemed to be very little protection under the circumstances, but the trainer survived, and when the lights finally came back on, he calmly finished the performance.

In an interview afterward, he was asked how he felt, knowing that the tigers could see him, but that he could not see them.

After first acknowledging the danger of that situation, the trainer pointed out that the tigers did not know that he could not see them.

He said, "I just kept cracking my whip, and talking to them, until the lights came on. And they never knew that I could not see them, as well as they could see me."

I tell you this story because, sometime in our lives, every one of us will have to face the terrifying task of fighting tigers in the dark. Abraham did. Peter did. Jesus certainly did. And we will as well.

You and I are kindred spirits with Abraham and Peter, but not because, like them, we hope that God will bring us substance and respect and power. For these things mean nothing, when you're in the dark, with a bunch of tigers.

Rather, what binds us together, with them, is our *faith*; that, like them, we can be sure of what we hope for, and certain of what we do not see.

For those who live by faith, know that substance and respect and power are commodities which, though here today, just as easily are gone tomorrow. But faith, when it is focused on the One who is eternal, faith remains.

Amen.