

## “Can God Really Be Believed?”

**S**ometime around 1,900 BC, a man named Abram packed everything up— his family, his possessions, his employees— and left everything familiar, because a voice that identified itself as God had promised Abram a new land and many children.

However, when Abram and his entourage arrive in this new land, a severe famine forced them to flee to Egypt, where there *was* food. And while they were in Egypt, Abram’s wife caught the fancy of Pharaoh, who took her to be one of his concubines. But a plague fell upon Pharaoh’s household, so he sent Abram’s wife back to him, and begged them to leave the country.

So far, it’s not looking too good for those promises made by that voice from the sky.

Back in the promised land, Abram again heard the voice of God, and again there was the promise of children, and land, and blessing. But by now, Abram has got to be wondering if he can really trust *this* promise any more than the last. After all, his wife still isn’t pregnant, and the borders of his land are now being threatened by an alliance of foreign kings. And God’s reputation, at least as far as Abram is probably concerned, is hanging by a thread.

And that’s where we pick up the story in today’s reading from Genesis. God’s voice is heard once more, and it’s promise time again.

But now, Abram has got to be wondering whether or not to even pay attention. Because so far, God’s promises have been just that, promises. Abram still has no children, his land is still under threat, his life has been anything but easy, and any blessings seem few and far between. But it’s promise time again, and God says:

“Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.”

But this time, Abram seems to have found the courage to question God's promises. And I'm paraphrasing when Abram says:

"Where were you, God 'my shield,' when, back in Egypt, Pharaoh wanted my wife for his plaything?"

"Where were you, when my nephew was taken prisoner?"

"And where *are* you, when my only heir is a slave?"

"You say to me 'Don't be afraid,' but why shouldn't I be afraid?"

"Nothing you've promised has happened. Nothing!"

And finally, Abram is beginning to look a bit more human. And finally, he has the courage to confront God, and give voice to all his anger, and frustration, and despair:

"I held up my end of the deal, God, but you haven't!"

"And here you make another promise. Why should I even bother with it?"

And that's really the question, isn't it? Can God really be believed? Can God really be trusted? And it's a question all of us face at one time or another: Does being a follower of God really make any difference?

In response to questions like these, there is one school of thought that says that faith— *real* faith— is about accepting *whatever* comes our way as God's plan for our life. We may not understand it, we may not even like it, but we simply have to believe that God is looking out for our best interests, no matter how bad things seem to get.

I'm not a big fan of that way of thinking, because it's a very small step from believing in a God who *allows* bad things to happen, to believing in a God who *causes* bad things to happen— like losing a job, or having your marriage break up, or your kid getting sick— because that's God's way of testing you, or punishing you, or whatever. I think that's an extremely problematic theology, and also a scary way to live.

But there's another school of thought that sees things differently; that understands faith as something to be wrestled with; that sees faith as something that is hard-won. This is the tradition of the psalmists, who cry out to God, (as we heard in our psalm today,)

“Hide not your face from me, nor turn away your servant in displeasure. You have been my helper; cast me not away; do not forsake me, O God of my salvation.”

But it's also the tradition of Job, abandoned by his friends, and struggling with a God who seems to let *ha satan*— the adversary, the accuser— have free reign over his life.

And it's the tradition of Jonah, sitting under a withered vine, wanting vengeance, and facing instead the inexplicable mercy of God.

And it's the tradition of Jesus, alone in the Garden of Gethsemane, *and* groaning from the cross, “My God, why have you forsaken me?”

Time and again, people of faith have had to wrestle with God. And Abram, and our psalmist, and Job, and Jonah, and Jesus, are just a few of the many people who've had to wrestle their way to faith. Who've demanded an answer from God. Who've had to struggle with a God who seems to make a lot of promises, but who also seems to take his sweet time fulfilling them.

And there probably isn't a person in this room who hasn't struggled with their faith, and wrestled with their doubts, and who've wondered if it's all worth it.

Perhaps the hardest part of my journey as a priest, have been those times when I was looking for the next church to serve.

I'd look at all the parish profiles before finally finding that one that seemed custom-fitted just for me, and thinking— no, being *convinced*— this is where God is going to send me! And before long, I would fall in love with that church, and I'd be thinking, “I could really do something with those people.”

But the process seemed to take so long. And there were so many interviews. And so many times being on the final slate of candidates, only to be passed over for someone else, and having my heart broken. And when it happens enough times, I begin wondering if I misheard God when I thought he was calling me into the priesthood.

But the search process is not all bad. Sometimes, I was able to enjoy the secret, personal pleasure of discovering that the person they actually selected turned out to be a real idiot; and I allowed myself to marinate in the schadenfreude, knowing “That wouldn’t have happened if they’d selected me.” And sometimes that would help.

But eventually the call would come, and we’d move to that new city, and I’d settle into my new job, and that’s when I’d you realize that this was the best choice for a new church, and God actually did know what he was doing, and I’d thank God that none of those other churches picked you.

“Do not be afraid,” God said to Abram. “I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” That’s what God said to Abram in our first reading this morning. But could God be believed?

In the end, God kept those promises he made to Abram. Some were just a few years in coming; others took whole generations to be realized. And from time to time, when some promise was slow in materializing, and Abram demanded an accounting from God, God would have to remind him:

“Abram, when I promised you land, I gave you land. And when there was a famine in that land, I sent you into Egypt. And when Pharaoh took your wife for his concubine, I sent a plague upon his household. And when foreign kings threatened your land, I protected you.”

And when he paused long enough to remember, Abram could see how his believing in God had eventually led him to trusting God; and out of that trust, eventually there came faith.

But it wasn't a shallow faith that came from a pious resignation to the fates, but a hard-fought and deeply-felt conviction, not based upon any promises that were *given*, but upon the promises that were *realized*.

And that took time. And it wasn't easy. But this may be the main lesson from today's reading from Genesis, and from Abram's life— that, if you give it time, faith happens.

I'd like to suggest that Lent is the perfect time to wrestle with God; to look at God face-to-face, and ask the tough questions, to struggle over the unmet promises, and demand answers from God.

And then, like Abram, maybe we'll find time to look back on our lives, and see where promises *have* been realized, and how God *was* there for us in the bad times. And remembering, we'll start believing again. And that belief will lead us to trusting God. And that trust will lead us, once again, into faith.

In the end, even though faith in God is sometimes a risky business, wherever we end up— whether it's in some promised new land, or in that perfect parish, or even on the Cross— God will be there with us. And in my experience, that's often been enough.

Amen.