

Second Sunday in Lent, 2021

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Romans 4:13-25

Mark 8:31-38

Psalm 22:22-30

A few weeks ago I sat with a woman whose health was deteriorating quickly and she had just signed on for hospice care. She was a woman of faith, and earlier in her life she had often been so aware of God's blessings she had wondered what she had done to deserve such largess.

But now, she was sick. Her body was giving out. She was in pain. She couldn't do simple things for herself that used to be easy. She felt like God had left her behind. And this brought on feelings of guilt. "If my faith were stronger, I wouldn't feel this way."

When I asked her how she was dealing with this she told me "I pray all the time, but God isn't responding." She gave me examples of how God had spoken to her in the past. There was a specific incident when she was terribly worried about her son who was traveling. She prayed for his safety and a sense of peace came over her that he would be okay. And he was. But now, she couldn't find that sense of peace, and that got translated into self-recrimination. She was sure that one of two things was true. Either her faith was not strong enough or maybe her faith was just not valid. In facing the one true absolute in life, her own death, the absolutes of her faith were being called into question. She was praying, why didn't she feel better? She was asking God for healing, but her physical symptoms were getting worse.

Feeling herself cut off from God, the doubt that erupted in her was frightening. Now, when she most needed the reassurance and confidence of her faith, it illuded her. So, she turned to me as her chaplain and asked, "what message do you have to make me feel better?" I scanned the archives of my seminary education and of course I came up blank. I did not have the perfect prayer, or scripture, or revelation to share with her, and so I said, "it's okay that you doubt God right now."

The alternative response would be, "just try harder, don't give up." That's not a bad strategy, perseverance in loving God is never a bad thing. But faith isn't just a matter of "putting your mind to it." The simple advice we often hear is "just keep believing." But it's not that simple. Pushing doubts to the side and charging forward is not the path to a deeper relationship with God. It's the route to fanaticism. Yet wallowing in doubt is a prescription for despair. It's not one or the other, faith OR doubt. Deep faith in God must embrace doubt because faith cannot grow without doubt, and doubt will destroy without faith.

In our first reading today from Genesis, God told Abram (when Abram was 99 years old) that he would be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. And God promises that Sarai will bear him a son. Now Abram had done a lot for God. He packed up his family and everything he owned and set out for an unknown destination. He didn't know where he was going. But he believed that God would lead him and let him know when he was where God wanted him to be. Would you trust a travel agent who said "Leave everything to me. Just pack what you have, and I'll tell you where you're going when you get there?" It seems almost irrational to us, but Abraham trusted and did what God asked. And now Abraham is asked to believe, and trust, that against all the rules of nature, Sarah will start having children. Again, Abraham trusts his Lord. But he didn't just jump on this "I'm going to inherit the world" sales pitch from God. He had to think about it.

In our reading from Romans, Paul describes it this way. "Abraham did not weaken in faith when God promised him and Sarah a son." Even though Abraham was, in his own thinking, "already as good as dead" and Sarah was barren even when she was of childbearing age, Abraham didn't ignore, suppress, or deny all the reasons God's promise was absurd. He looked at those things, considered his own body, and Sarah's, and reflected on God's promises. And even though those promises had not yet been fulfilled, he trusted. He was totally convinced that what God has promised is what God is able to do. And of course, he was right.

The point for us is that the struggle between doubt and faith, faith and doubt, is something that recurs throughout our lives. Over and over again we encounter the fact that life doesn't always

go our way. It's good that we step back and ask the question, Where is God in all of this? "This isn't the way things are supposed to be." We are meant to question our assumptions and beliefs. That's how we refine and strengthen our faith. Doubts can work in our favor!

Thank God somebody doubted that the world was flat, that the earth was the center of the universe, that it must take years to develop a vaccine! Doubt is what fuels growth, discovery, deeper understanding, creativity.

But embracing doubt and dealing with it is also painful. It always means we risk giving up what we thought was true and infallible, whether that be the Bible, the Pope, or our favorite news channel. In the Letter to the Hebrews, we read that "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen." (Heb 11:1) But insisting that those "things unseen" exist just the way we imagine them is not faith, it's ego.

The woman I spoke of earlier had faith grounded in and solidified by what she had seen and experienced in her life. But now she is confronted with a situation which makes her wonder if she had it all wrong. She is face to face with the brutal reality that faith can claim no guarantees.

So where, you may ask, is the Good News in that? The Good News is that God's love is constant, close, and non-negotiable. The bad news is that God is often subtle to a fault! We get stuck in a mindset of how God should work in our lives and then things change, adversity strikes, and up pops the question. Where is my God in all this? Where is God for my colleague whose daughter is dying from breast cancer? Where was God for the people of Texas earlier this month, for the children caught up in sex trafficking, for the families of over 500 thousand Americans who have died from COVID-19? Where is God for...fill in the blank from your own lives.

Back to my hospice patient who had misplaced God. I hope you're not wondering how I solved her problem for her. Because, of course, I didn't. The best I could do was to encourage her to

open herself to receive God's love and reassurance in a way she may not have recognized it before. I wanted her to look for the love, to get beyond her own sense of hopelessness and look for the love. Because, my dear brothers and sisters, faith is always about love. God's love and faithfulness far exceed our expectations, and even our hopes. But that Love rarely rescues us from our distress by making the situation go away. In fact, it may take great openness of mind and spirit to see and receive God's love in the midst of our pain. But know that when, in the midst of our pain and bewilderment, we cry out "My God, my God, where are you?" God is whispering back, "I'm still right here."

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