

**"When You Don't Know For Sure"
Genesis 15:1-16a
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*But he said, "O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?"
Genesis 15:8*

When Al and I were in Blue Ridge, Georgia, a couple of weeks ago, we stopped for lunch at a diner with a sign out front which proclaimed that the best hamburgers in the state of Georgia were inside. Turns out the sign was not lying. The burgers and the French fries were delicious. We ate our fill and then some and thus were dismayed to see on the sidewalk just outside the diner one of those old-fashioned weight and fate machines. I was not brave enough to put my own nickel in at that moment, but I remembered a story about a couple who did. The husband went first. He inserted the coin, stepped on the scale, and in three seconds, a little piece of paper emerged from the slot in the machine. He took it out and read it. "Listen to my fortune, honey. This says I am going to be a great success in life. The forces of fate are smiling on me."

His wife said, "Could I have that little piece of paper?" He handed it to her. She read it, then said, "Just as I thought. It's got your weight wrong, too."

Sarah, wife of Abraham, could have had a similar type of exchange with her husband after their arrival in the land of Canaan. The Lord had promised to make of Abraham a great nation, to make his name great, and to use him and his descendants to be a great blessing to all the families of the earth. (Genesis 12:1-3) So far, nothing of promise had happened.

The leave-taking from Haran had been poignant. The journey to the Promised Land had been marked by misadventures. If they had expected a brass band to meet them at the border, they were sorely disappointed. So far, though God had promised to make him a patriarch, Abraham was nothing more than a resident alien without legal rights or property holdings. So far, the nursery was empty, the rocking chair still, the lullabies unsung. Abraham had bet his life on the future that God had promised but so far, God had not delivered on the divine end of the bargain. The likelihood is that Abraham had begun to wonder, "Did I hear it

wrong? How do I know the covenant is still good? Did I do the right thing to trust the God who called me and sent me on my way to a new tomorrow?"

Here's an interesting thing about Abraham. Before he heard the voice of God saying *Get up and go*, before he became a monotheist following this one God, he had most assuredly been a polytheist.(1) His hometown of Ur had as its patron god the moon god Nanna. The Mesopotamian River Valley was littered with gods and goddesses of every sort and nature. Nevertheless, when he received the call from the one God whose name was El Shaddai, Abraham listened and responded in faith. He gave his heart, soul, mind and future to the one true God. The truth is, though, he did not know the Lord very well. You know how, when you have a date and you think, "Oh, this is a nice person. And I'll go out with him again..." But you don't know the person well. It takes time to know another intimately, to know whether the other is trustworthy or not. The journey into Canaan is really a metaphor for Abraham's journey into knowledge of God and into covenant with God. (2) Day by day, crisis by crisis, we come to know the other. We come to trust or not to trust. When we come upon Abraham in today's text, he hasn't fallen into disbelief, but his faith is getting just a little bit shaky.

Have you noticed, by the way, the new wave of interest in atheism? Christianity and religion as a whole have some vehement critics these days, including Oxford University lecturer Richard Dawkins, whose book *The God Delusion* has been on the *New York Times*' best-seller list for the past 22 weeks. There's another book *The End of Faith* by philosopher Sam Harris that argues that in the clash between reason and religion, reason will win out every time. Harris blames religion for all the great atrocities throughout human history. He seems to have forgotten that there have been plenty of atrocities to go around. I believe that Mao Tse Tung, Joseph Stalin and Pol Pot would have described themselves as atheists, and they caused a world of hurt. I also question the assumption that religion and reason are enemies of one another. Both are valid ways of knowing, complementary ways of discerning the truth. I will not deny that there are those who advocate mindlessness in the name of God; yet, one of the great things about our Presbyterian tradition is that it has, for the past five hundred years, been committed to the notion that God is to be loved with the mind, the intellect, with the powers of reason, as well as with the heart.

It's interesting to me that the scriptures do not deal with the question of whether or not God exists. The question that is asked over and over again in the scriptures is not – Is there a God - but, why, God, did you allow this or that or the other to happen?

The Psalms are full of lament and complaint about the human condition and questions as to why terrible things have happened and where God was when they did; yet, the existence of God is the given, even when the Psalmist cries out "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (These words find their way to Jesus' lips as he dies on the cross.) The question is not - Is there a God, but whether God can be trusted to be God, to be there, to fulfill the promises that God has made. In other words, is the covenant good, or not? It doesn't look as if it's holding up very well there on Golgotha, does it? There is no bleaker human condition for the human heart than to imagine that one has been abandoned, forgotten by God.

Abraham was not quite at that point, but he was wondering, because he did not yet know how fully God could be trusted. He was caught in the tension between faith and doubt. I imagine that you and I know the place. The early Christian church considered Abraham to be their role model for perfect faith. They wrote about how he answered and set out and didn't ask questions and just went on and on trusting, trusting, trusting. But in their account of the story (Hebrews 11:8-12), Abraham's times of doubt have been airbrushed out, like that photograph in which you look like a million dollars. No crows' feet, no double chin.

The truth is, no one has ever had flawless faith, not even the patriarchs and matriarchs of our faith. Remember when Sarah overheard that she was going to have a baby, even though she was long past her childbearing years? Remember what she did? She laughed her head off! The pivot on which the whole plan of salvation, and in our individual salvation, the pivot on which it all turns is not our faith in God, which ebbs and flows. The pivot is the trustworthiness of God. God does not love with a now and then kind of love. God's love is the everlasting love. *Hesed*, it is called in the Hebrew language – God's covenant is unbreakable on God's part. Once God makes a promise, the promise will be fulfilled. That is the ground upon which we stand. That is the foundation of human history. That is the basis of our hope for this life and for the world to come.

God will deliver. No, we don't trust it and believe it everyday. Sometimes, in the midst of the chaos and the loss and the fearful things that happen, our confidence falters. Like Peter in the midst of the storm on the Sea of Galilee, we begin to sink like a rock because we have taken our eyes off the One who is the source of our strength and whose word will stand forever. Since the terrible bus wreck on I-75 at Northside Drive, I have been struck by the depth of faith of the

families and friends of those young people who were killed or injured. The question for them has not been why. In a broken world full of chance, terrible things happen. The question has been: Will God be there for us? The answer is yes. The promise has never been that any of us will avoid the valley of the shadow of death. The promise is *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.*

The late Christian priest and writer Henri Nouwen became interested in the circus and particularly a family of trapeze artists called the Rodleighs, whom he got to know personally. The leader of the Rodleigh trapeze group once spoke to Father Nouwen about his trust in his catcher. Rodleigh, a flyer, was the one who got all the credit and applause. "The secret," Rodleigh said, "is that the flyer does nothing. It is the catcher who does everything. Joe is my catcher. I simply have to stretch out my arms and hands and he catches me and pulls me safely over the apron beyond the catch bar."

"You do nothing?"

"Nothing," Rodleigh said. "The flyer must fly and the catcher must catch. The flyer must trust, trust with outstretched arms, that his catcher will be there for him." (*Our Greatest Gift: A Meditation on Dying and Caring*)

When we stand at a funeral and make the bold claim that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, we are saying that God will be there. It's about trusting, while acknowledging that progress is never made in matters of faith in a straight line, but always back and forth, up and down. Over time and under God's patient care, we come to know that we can put all our weight down on the goodness and promises of God.

Four people have asked me already this morning what I believe about the new ossuary that has been found, allegedly containing the bones of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and others said to be members of Jesus' family. What I would answer is simply this: The resurrection can never be proven or dis-proven with a box of bones. None of the promises of God, none of the claims of our faith can be proven in advance, but if we live them, if we live as if we are citizens of a resurrection world, then we will run in to the risen Christ wherever we go.

Abraham could not see at the time how God would bless the world through him, but God did. Maybe you and I ought to relax a little bit and not worry quite so much about whether we believe or how much we believe or whether we believe

more or less than the person at your office who is always wanting to praise the Lord and wanting you to praise the Lord, too. What we need to do is act in faith and live in love. Then, just about everything will fall into place, and we will be what we are meant to be: God's hopeful people.

At the end of the story in Genesis, God and Abraham go through a rather bizarre ritual of sacrifice. People said of the early Christians that they went through a rather odd ritual of sacrifice when they gathered together. They sat at table and shared bread with one another saying, "This is the body of our Lord, broken for you."

Sisters and brothers, I have good news. God never has backed out on the deal. Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Receive the cup of the new covenant, the blood of Christ, who suffered and died and rose again from the dead. We will never fully understand these great mysteries, but we can receive them, and be grateful, and know that God's transforming power is at work in our lives, as it was in the lives of an adventurous old couple named Abraham and Sarah, who lived long ago. Thanks be to God.

- (1) Celia Brewer Sinclair, *In the Beginning, Perspectives on Genesis*.
- (2) Ibid.