

**The Sacramental Sky**

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

Luke 13-31-35

“[Abram] believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.” There may be no other sentence in the Old Testament that has meant more to followers of the New. God told Abraham that he and Sarah would have millions of descendants—as many as the stars in the sky. Abraham believed God, and that was enough to make him righteous in God’s eyes. Abraham did not have to fight any battles, follow any commandments, love any neighbors, or give anything up for Lent. All he had to do was believe what God told him. So Abraham did, and God reckoned that made him right.

Forever after that—from the apostle Paul to Billy Graham, from Martin Luther to Martin Luther King Jr, for Muslims, Christians, and Jews--Abraham has served as the earliest gold standard of faith, the primal believer who trusted God’s promise though he had no earthly evidence that the promise was ever going to come true. For Protestants in particular, his story is key. Abraham did not lift a finger to be saved. All he did was believe God’s promises, and that was enough. He was saved by faith alone.

Rewards followed. Because Abraham believed God would give him descendants, God did, along with a land flowing with milk and honey for them to live in. Would God have delivered those concrete goods if Abraham had not believed? We will never know. All we know, from this testament and the next, is that those with faith the size of a mustard seed will be able to move mountains (Matt 17:20). They will be given what they ask for; the doors they knock on will be opened (Matthew 7:7). Nothing will be impossible for them.

That is great news if you happen to be one of them. I couldn’t say, since I don’t know many of them. The people I know worry that they *don’t* have faith—or not enough of it—or not the right kind. Ask them how they know and they may tell you they don’t believe everything they are supposed to. They keep their fingers crossed during parts of the creed. They have a hard time with miracle stories. They are not *remotely* convinced that God loves them just the way they are. They try hard to do what is right, but that isn’t moving many mountains for them. It isn’t even helping them sleep at night.

Some keep bottles of Excedrin P.M. by their beds. Others wake up sweaty from dreams in which big loud things are pounding on their front doors. Then they lie in the dark worrying about everything from where their children will go to college to whether they will ever have enough money to retire. If they just had more faith, they say, if they just *believed*, then none of this would be happening to them.

If they had faith, they would be able to sleep soundly through the night. They would walk around with a working compass inside of them—one that pointed true north no matter where they were. If they had faith, they would not be angry or afraid anymore. They would be as calm and confident as Abraham was, resting on the promises of God.

The great thing about Abraham is that he wasn’t like that at all.

He knew who God was when God came to him in a vision, because God had come to him twice before. Plenty had happened since then, too. Abraham and Sarah had been to Egypt and back. They had become rich. Abraham had succeeded in battle--but still no son, and still no land.

Then God came back a third time to re-promise those rewards—in a vision, the Bible says, although Abraham did not *see* anything at first. He *heard* something instead—“the word of the Lord came to him,” the Bible says, and the first four words were “Do not be afraid”—which tells you that Abraham *was* afraid, or that he was at least *prone* to being afraid.

And who wouldn't have been? Sometimes, even when you have prayed holes in the rug for a word from God—even when you have announced to the universe that you are as ready as you will ever be for some proof of divine life—even then, sudden results can turn your bones to water. You can start talking yourself out of what is happening as fast as you talked your way in.

*Must not be fully awake yet.*

*Must have been the habaneros on the enchiladas last night.*

*What if this isn't God at all but an angel from the other side?*

Then again, Abraham may not have been *all* that afraid, because he switched gears pretty quickly. “O Lord GOD,” he said, “what will you give me?” That's so embarrassing that you have to wonder why anyone wrote it down, but that's what it says. The Lord GOD came to Abraham and the first thing Abraham said was, “what will you give me?”

Of course God had told him that his reward would be very great, so the question was not off topic. It was just a little abrupt, a little short on reverence. When I was learning to pray, my teacher told me that you always begin by praising God. *Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the Universe. Holy is your Name, for you have done marvelous things.*

Then you thank God for at least some of those things, even the ones that have not benefited you directly. *We thank you for the splendor of the whole creation, for the beauty of this world, for the wonder of life, and for the mystery of love.*<sup>1</sup>

Then you can ask for what you want, but reverently—respectfully. You don't just say, “What will you give me?” and then follow that up with a direct complaint like Abraham did. “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.”

But that was what Abraham said, and God did not strike him dead. Instead, God reassured him. No slave would be his heir, God said; no one but a child of Abraham's own body would be his heir. Then God brought the old man outside, which means that he was inside before that—in a tent, maybe, where all he could see above his head was black tarp with a few rips in it.

Outside, Abraham could see a lot more than that. I don't know where you live, but chances are that you cannot see half of what Abraham saw. At the very least, you have three neighbors who leave their porch lights on at night. At worst, you live where the lights of parking lots, football stadiums, tall buildings and billboards cast such an artificial glow in the sky that you might as well be in a tent for all you can see of the stars at night.

But Abraham could see—not just specks of light in the sky but the actual colors of some of them—some yellow, some red, some flashing back and forth between blue and green—plus millions of tiny ones so small they looked like phosphorescent clouds. There were triangles of stars up there, long rectangles of stars, swirls and rivers of stars up there.

“Count them if you can,” God said, but how could Abraham do that? Every time he started, one would fall or another would appear. There was no way to count the stars. They went on. They went deep and deep. Anyone who looked into Abraham's eyes right then could have them littered with stars, as many as would fit on the twin planets of one old man's eyes.

“So shall your descendents be,” God said. And Abraham believed the Lord, and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

*Wait! What happened right there?* We get all kinds of other details in this story, right down to the name of Eliezer of Damascus, but at the golden hinge of the story, the point at which the whole history of three major world religions could have gone either way, all we get is a flat statement of fact: “Abraham believed the LORD.”

*Since? Because?* If we are supposed to follow that example could we have a little more, please? Was the tipping point rational or intuitive? Did it require huge effort on Abraham’s part or was it as easy as falling in love? *How did Abraham come to faith in God?*

I am not sure any story can answer that question, at least not for every reader. For instance, what does “faith” mean? How would you define it? If this were a different sort of event and we all twittered, I might have a screen behind me and you could all start sending your tweets. Maybe some of you are doing that anyway, even without the screen.

Does faith mean surrendering to God’s will or does it mean taking an active role in God’s future? Does it mean accepting what you have been told without asking impertinent questions or does it mean wrestling every day with all kinds of scary angels? Does one always take a “leap” of faith or does one sometimes “lurch” toward faith instead?

What happens inside a person that allows him or her to trust God?

I used to think in order to trust anyone or anything I first had to determine the trustworthiness of that person or object. If I were going to trust a rickety looking bridge to bear my weight then I waited until someone else about my size walked across it first. If I were going to trust a friend to keep a confidence then I paid attention to whether or not she told me other people’s secrets first.

This struck me as a logical way to proceed, and it worked well enough for a long time. The only problem was that my ability to trust stayed dependent on something outside of me that was beyond my control. If the bridge wobbled, I couldn’t trust it. If the friend gossiped, I couldn’t trust her. It was like my trust was not mine to give. It always depended on how someone or something else acted, so that I was never really in charge of it. Like a day trader in the stock market, I might extend trust and withdraw it ten times a day—all depending on how the rest of the market was responding to my investment.

Then someone offered me a definition of trust that turned my logic upside down. “Your ability to trust doesn’t have anything to do with anyone but you,” he said. “You weigh the risks, and then you decide. Basically, trust means deciding you can handle it if you get screwed.”

I’ll find out later whether it was all right for me to say that here. I weighed the risks, and I decided I could handle it if I got...anyway...I think that guy was right. Trust is never entirely logical. Faith never makes perfect sense. It is more like a gift that human beings are able to give—an act of ridiculous courage in which people who cannot control the outcome of their decisions to trust decide to trust anyway—to act *as if* the universe were trustworthy—and who figure they can handle it if they are wrong.

If today’s story is any indication, then things don’t suddenly improve once you believe God. *You* don’t suddenly improve. Abraham was fearful and cranky *before* he believed God, and he was fearful and cranky *after* he believed God. He had a nice moment in between while he was looking at the stars. Then God promised him land and Abraham said, “I don’t know that. How am I supposed to know that?”

Here we go again.

But God didn’t say, “I thought you believed me.” God just put him to work.

Bring me a heifer, a goat, a ram, a turtledove, and a pigeon, God said, maybe thinking that would keep the old man busy for a while. When Abraham had fetched them all, he cut everything but the birds in two and laid the halves against each other.

God did not tell him to do that part, incidentally; Abraham already knew that was how you sealed a covenant in those days, the ancient equivalent of “Cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye.” Once you made your vows, you walked between the pieces of the slain animals, as if to say, “May the same thing happen to me if I fail to keep my word.”

But before he could walk anywhere, Abraham saw a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch pass between the pieces of meat he had laid out earlier, only there was nobody holding either one of them. There were just smoke and fire, God’s favorite calling cards.

In this way, Abraham learned that God was taking the walk Abraham had thought was meant for him. Abraham did not cross his heart that starry night. God crossed God’s. While Abraham watched, God assumed the whole risk of the covenant, which included the very great risk of trusting Abraham with the divine promises and being wrong about him. And that is what faith looked like on that night at least: Abraham accepted the risk of gambling on a God who was willing to gamble on him.

That may not be enough for you, especially since the rewards can be such a long time coming and there’s no guarantee that you’ll sleep better even after they do. But if there is anything about this story that sounds true to you, then it is your story and you may step into it any time you want. You may leap or you may lurch. You may invent a whole new way of getting there—or not—but if you do, imagine this: a brand new star appears in Abraham’s eye (and he starts counting all over again).

©Barbara Brown Taylor  
Duke University Chapel, Durham, NC  
February 18, 2010

---

<sup>i</sup> The Book of Common Prayer