

The Second Sunday after Pentecost, 11 June 2023
Saint Aidan's Episcopal Church, Portland OR
The Rev'd Canon Raggs Ragan, Interim Rector

In the Name of God whose love gives us life and hope.

Today's readings are all about our relationship with the divine. Of course we would not exist at all without God's loving us into life, so it is clear that the initiative is all on God's side. But to live in that relationship we are created for, there are things we can do, ways we can live, not to earn God's love, but to fully participate in it.

The improbable story of Abraham's call lies at the root of the self-understanding of Jews and Christians and Muslims. God wants to have a people who will live out the human relationship with the divine for all the world to see – and does not choose a ruler of empire or someone in a center of trade and culture or any other highly visible figure. God chooses an unknown herdsman and uproots him and his family sending them to an obscure place far away to put down roots in someone else's land. We have all heard the story of Abraham, most of us for all our lives, so we may not be conscious of how unlikely it all is.

When I was in graduate school, I was part of a weekly Bible study. We were all scholars in varied unrelated fields, none of which had anything to do with religion, but we were people of faith who wanted to better understand our sacred texts. For our first study we decided that we wanted to see what we could learn about God's calls to people from the accounts in the Hebrew Bible. We spend a year reading every story that seemed to us to relate to this idea – and came up with one overwhelming conclusion: God consistently calls the improbable, the ones no one would expect. You might think this conclusion a bit obvious and even silly – and that it should not have taken a year of serious study to get there – but we were young scholars, used to examining evidence in great detail in our various fields before reaching any conclusions, and we were young people seeking to understand what we might look for in our own lives to understand what God might want for our lives.

For me this study was very helpful as I came to listen to my own call from God into the priesthood – at a time when no women had ever been considered for the priesthood in the Episcopal Church – and having myself grown up in a parish where women were not even included in the choir!

In our study we saw God again and again calling the improbable, people who clearly cannot accomplish whatever task God has in mind on their own. The flip side of this is that God calls each of us to improbable things. My training could have made me an effective and pioneering professor of Slavics – or a positive force in the State Department or the UN or international commerce to facilitate cooperation and understanding between Americans and Russians. Instead, God called me out of the world of Slavic scholarship and into the role that became my career with all its joys and challenges.

Everyone's story is unique, because each of us is loved into being as a unique creation, but observing patterns helps us to increase our understanding.

So what do we see about the story of Abraham in today's readings: we see that God is choosing an individual with whom to establish a relationship that will then extend beyond that one person and his extended family to eventually include all people. God is calling Abraham to participate in this work of building a human community in relationship with God. God is calling Abraham to be an example and a help. Abraham is not called into a passive relationship; the call gives him work to do.

So Abraham is an example of the call of the improbable person, an example of someone who does not have all kinds of human advantage to make the offered work possible – no empire, no far reaching communication network, not even youth with its potential for long life in the calling. What Abraham has most of all is trust. Abraham listens to the call of God and follows the call to an unknown place and an unknown future – and takes his family with him.

In Hebrew Scripture, Abraham's relationship with God is seen to establish a lineage, to establish a new people, a new nation that did not exist before. God does not choose the best nation or the strongest, or indeed any existing nation at all; this is something new. Like the creation narrative at the beginning of Genesis that we heard last week, this is another example of God creating what will be out of what is not yet – an entirely new thing. And throughout Hebrew Scripture, people are called to remember that, to be grateful for the relationship established with Abraham and all who come after him.

In our second reading Paul speaks about this relationship in terms of the Christian reality, life after the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ. The relationship established between the family of Abraham and God is described as a singular relationship with a particular bloodline – but that changes when last week we heard the Risen Christ calling his followers (who at that time were in fact all members of Abraham’s bloodline) to go forth and bring in people from everywhere, people of every lineage.

So if Abraham is still claimed to be the Father of Faith, what does that mean for those of us who are completely outside his bloodline? Now we are the improbable ones. God is again calling the unexpected ones, and reminding us that it is all about our relationship with God – and then ultimately with one another. Abraham is the first Patriarch, the father of the Hebrew people, but he is also, from the beginning, called to be the ‘Father of many nations’, because the relationship with God is more about inclusion than about membership in a bloodline. No one denies the special relationship established with ‘Abraham and his descendants for ever’ – but like Paul, we realize that descent can be a matter of the heart, not just a matter of blood.

Paul emphasizes the relationship as one of Faith, making it useful to remember that the words we say in the creed about believing in God mean at their root, ‘giving our hearts’ to God, entrusting our hearts to God. This is what Abraham did when he listened to God and trusted his fate and the fates of all he loved best to the God he had given his heart to. And as our example, Abraham is our father in faith, the one who shows us how to trust, how to listen, how to move into the unknown with confidence in the love that created us and is calling us into new and unexpected adventures. Abraham shows us that the relationship of faith, our relationship with the divine, always begins with God’s initiative, God’s invitation, that it is nothing we can earn or have a right to. It is a gift. God’s hand is always reaching out to us, for us to perceive and accept – or not.

The Gospel story does not mention Abraham, but the understanding of Abraham’s trusting relationship with God in which the people of Israel came to be gives us insight into what Jesus, brought up steeped in centuries of the Hebrew tradition, means by faith. The healing comes to those who give their trust to God, who give their hearts to God, who accept the offer of relationship and the healing that makes possible, whatever form it takes.

This can feel very abstract and not particularly helpful compared to lists of rules, assured ways to earn God’s love and favor. But what we see in Abraham, and learned in the Stanford Bible study, and hear from Jesus, is that we don’t ever earn it, no matter how meticulously we follow any set of rules. The love is there reaching out to us, is ours from the moment we are breathed into life. What is up to us is taking the hand that is offered, is accepting the love and responding in kind.

So how do we live that out? How does that inform the ongoing process of looking to the future, in terms of calling a new Rector and being the Body of Christ in this place and time at Saint Aidan’s? As children of Abraham, we know that we do not have to earn God’s love and help, because it is always there for us. That can give us confidence. We know that the love which brought all things into being is ours to accept, can be relied upon always. That can give us hope. I think that remembering Abraham and Sarah, who at the beginning were already older than most of us here (I don’t particularly like Paul’s reference to Abraham’s age as ‘as good as dead’), remembering them setting out into the wilderness into a completely unknown future, can be an encouragement in each of our hearts. Like Abraham, we do not know exactly what the future holds or what improbable calls God will have for us as individuals or as a community. What we do know is that we are all invited to give our hearts to God, whose heart is always reaching out for us, and that in that heart connection we will find our paths, however improbable – and that we will never be abandoned.

Let us pray: Holy God, as we open our hearts to you, help us to hear your invitation, to see the opportunities you set before us to be Christ’s hands and feet and voice for the blessing of your world, and give us the strength and wisdom to respond with love and gratitude. Amen.