

Almost, Not Yet

Psalm 136: 1-9,23-26; Hebrews 11:13-32

At this point, the author of the book of Hebrews is bringing his letter to a close much as a modern musical might wind to a big finish with a reprise. You know! That big number at the end of the play where all the characters make one last appearance to take one last bow before the curtains are drawn and everybody goes home with the sound of music still echoing in their ears. And he does this, our author troops out these ancient heroes one more time, I think because he knows that the real gospel is less about logic and technique than it is about story and character and faith.

So it's back to Abraham this week, and at last we reach the big finale of his life which was, after all that struggle and waiting, all those adventures and mishaps which finally sorted out late in life with Sarah giving birth to Isaac, after all that, the Lord appears to Abraham and tells him in so many words, "I want the boy back." Which amounts to God apparently renegeing on the whole complex of promises he'd made to Abraham and Sarah about God blessing "*all the families on earth*" through Isaac, the one child that they were able to have together.

Now God's command to Abraham was heartbreaking by any measure, but it was not the preposterous absurdity then that it sounds like today. I've spent a lot of hot air through the years trying to get modern people to understand how different the world was in the centuries before Jesus came. And one critical difference was that, before Moses and the commandments and Jesus and the gospel, human life was far less valuable in people's minds than it is today. The fact is that human sacrifice was a common feature of ancient pagan piety all over the world in the days of Abraham.

Back then, if you and your people were threatened with plague or famine or violence, it was commonly considered a noble thing to throw one of your children on the altar as a way of impressing some god or goddess with how desperately you needed their help and blessing. So Abraham, however heartbroken he may have been, did not consider it unreasonable that the God who had brought him so far and shown him so much would demand the life of Isaac for a ritual that an ancient person might imagine would somehow play into the promises God had been making him all along.

And, of course, with the benefit of hindsight, you and I know that the ritual did play in. The young man, Isaac, noticed right away that Abraham had not brought the animal he customarily offered God whenever he worshiped. So Isaac questioned his father about it. On the way up the mountain he said, "*Father, we have wood and flame, but where is the sacrifice?*" And his perplexed and heartbroken father answered cryptically with a word that would turn out to be prophecy, "*God will provide the sacrifice.*"

And God did provide the sacrifice. That day in Genesis, it was a ram caught by its head in the thorns, and almost 2000 years later, it would be Christ, likely on the same mountain, his head also caught in thorns, the one and only descendant of Abraham whose death could possibly bless “*all the families on earth*”. But the point here in Hebrews is that Abraham had to live out this strange pageant without knowing how the story would end.

Isaac was saved on that day, and Isaac will rise one bright day soon because he and his father trusted God to do things for them that they couldn't begin to foresee on their way up the mountain. Hebrews tells us that it was this sort of faith that prompted Isaac in his old age to bless his sons, “*Jacob and Esau*”. That was a comical scene in many respects, not the least of which was the fact that Isaac prophesied for Jacob a destiny all out of proportion to anything Isaac actually owned, Jacob would rule “*nations*” even though Isaac was living in a tent on land that wasn't even his own.

So Abraham's was a family that lived in tents and banked on promises. Jacob's life was even less stable and substantial than his father and grandfather. Jacob was driven from where Isaac lived by a desperate famine and ended up a refugee in Egypt with all his sons at the end of his life. It was during Jacob's interview with Pharaoh that he confessed to living in the world as “*a stranger and alien*” his whole life. But just like his father Isaac, when it came time to die, Jacob made grandiose prophecies about the destiny of his offspring.

His grandsons by Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh, were promised vast holdings of land and wealth and power by Jacob, a man who possessed none of the above. And the shopworn promise that Jacob's family would both rule and save humanity was faithfully passed on as well to children and grandchildren who would be slaves for centuries before they would own any property at all. So the book of Genesis ends with the death of Joseph the Dreamer, who had saved the brothers who betrayed him.

But on his deathbed, Joseph reminds the whole bunch that one day they would need to bring his bones to the land that God had promised. And no sooner does Joseph dance off stage in this Hebrew musical than the music swells and up rises Moses, four hundred years later, who was born in an era in Egypt that saw the Israelites descend from refugees into slaves and finally into hunted prey. When Moses was born, all Hebrew boys were slated by Pharaoh to die, but Moses parents' beheld him as “*beautiful*” and they manipulated for him to take a voyage into the arms of Pharaoh's princess.

So Moses grew up in the palace, was trained to be an Egyptian statesman, and he might have gone there, but he couldn't shake the promise whispered around the campfires of his people that there was a God who had chosen them to go to a homeland of their own from which, one day, they would save humanity. So Moses threw away a sure thing in Egypt for a life of hardship and sacrifice in which four decades would go by before he was even allowed to see a burning bush.

Every stage of the Exodus was shrouded in shadows and danger. The night before they left, there was a terrifying plague which Moses and the Israelites only escaped after they had splattered the top and sides of their doorways with the blood of lambs. It was a crude picture of the cross on which an Israelite would one day die to save the world. But to them that night, it looked like an absurd gesture on a night that sickness was in the land and all God's people ate standing up at table, waiting for the signal that the time had come for them to head for the desert.

Within days after making their break, they found themselves pinned on the banks of the Red Sea, Pharaoh's cavalry and chariots hot on their heels, only to hear God's prophet invite them to march out onto an ocean bed left uncovered by some tidal fluke that could reverse itself at any moment. But they marched out there based on Moses' word that God had arranged the whole thing, and that, just like the Passover, they would be held safe while Pharaoh and the Egyptians would suffer a terrible judgment.

With that, Moses is danced off stage in the book of Hebrews and we skip a whole generation into the future to find God's people marching day after day around Jericho, a fortified city surrounded by an Israelite army that had nothing in the way of the siege engines or weapons they would need to get past the walls. In obedience to God, they stamp their feet and blow their horns, only to watch in startled terror as their invisible God brought the whole place down, a terrifying judgment that only one family survived.

Her name was Rahab and, alone among the Canaanites who lived in Jericho, Rahab had believed the stories about the Israelites, that race of herdsmen whose God had ransacked Egypt in advance of their escaping from slavery. So Rehab became the epitome of the second verse of Amazing Grace, "*T'was grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved.*" Grace appeared to Rahab in the form of Israelite spies, who arrived at her doorstep about to be taken and killed by Rahab's own people.

And Rahab made the same sort of decision that Moses had made in Egypt. She decided to bank on the promises of God over and against the tactical advantages her home city offered her. So she believed in God and sided with the spies and they gave her a scarlet cord of yarn to hang from her window, kind of like the blood on the doors at Passover. It was a sign from God that whatever she had done, whatever she had been, she and her family now belonged to God.

Our author makes the point that the musical doesn't end with the reprise he has offered us today. There is a whole list of other characters and different stories he could bring on stage if only time and interest allowed. My fear for you this morning is that the musical has already gone on too long, that already you are starting to yawn and to wonder what this old fossil is getting at. A month or two ago, my wife and I went to the theater, a rare occasion, to see the new movie, "Dunkirk".

It was about the desperate evacuation of the British and French armies trapped by the Nazi's against the Belgian coast during World War II. It is a story almost the match of Israel crossing

the Red Sea. But what struck me about the movie is that the filmmaker showed us all the raw events of those days, the chaos and terror and cowardice and heroism without telling us enough about the different characters that we could learn what made them what they were that day, or what they were likely to become in the years going out. It made me wonder if modern audiences had lost patience for those quieter, more subtle forces that slowly make people what they are over time.

The New Testament tells us the story of a breed of mystic rabbi's, Pharisees, tempting God's people to invest in the notion that there was a technique, that there are methods by which God can be won over to our cause, made to serve our agenda. They are anonymous in Jesus' parables, although he talks about them a lot! But in the book of Acts in Samaria it was a man named Simon Magus, on the island of Cyprus it was a man named Elymus.

In Paul's letters to Galatia and Colossae, they are anonymous again, but Paul warns the disciples there not to buy in to any spiritual regime that promises a mastery and a power that is more dramatic and more accessible than simply trusting Christ and being loyal to gospel and church over time. The woods are full of false teachers who will want us to think that spirituality is a matter of technique and performance, mastery and drama, when in fact it has always been about the quieter, more subtle forces that teach us to persevere at what is hard, and to believe in what is invisible over time.

Abraham, waiting decades for a son and being willing to give him back to God, trusting that somehow the promises will still happen, even when God has seemed to pull the rug out from under him. Jacob and Joseph, remembering God promises and repeating the promises to their children even though their circumstances don't warrant optimism. Moses, the great Egyptian statesman, shepherding sheep for forty years in the Sinai before God begins to use him at all. Believers splattering blood on doorways in the face of a plague, tying yarn to a window in the face of an invasion, believing that God would save them based on lessons and promises that were invisible and far off.

That is the faith that turns the wheels of the God's kingdom...and to depend on anything else, anything more is to lose the concept entirely.