

It Depends on Faith
Genesis 15:1-6
Hebrews 11:1-3; 8-16

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

Consider, for a moment, this little sentence from a sermon delivered to an unknown congregation by an unknown preacher: “Faith is the *assurance* of things hoped for, the *conviction* of things not seen.” Assurance and conviction. Two words that stop short of certainty.

Assurance is a word said to us from outside of ourselves, a word we cannot say to ourselves, a word that, when heard, can be trusted only if the speaker is trustworthy. Think of a doctor’s assurance, a parent’s assurance, a teacher’s, a friend’s, a preacher’s assurance or even, sometimes, the chance assurance of a stranger whose word in the dark is just enough to go on, especially when the future is anything but certain because of an illness or an accident, a failure or an unbearable loss, a broken spirit or a broken heart? I repeat: assurance is a word spoken from the outside in.

Perhaps you have spoken a word of assurance to another at that moment when she was about to give up on the things she had hoped for. Or the one at a turn in the road where all evidence was leading a friend to turn back or give up or give in, except that you said, for reasons that escape even you, “There is light at the end of a very long tunnel. I promise!” Or imagine you are the powerless adult holding the child in Mississippi crying for her daddy on the first day of school, the one searching for an honest word that will keep her hope for her father’s return alive. Sometimes the assurance of things hoped for can only be a wordless embrace which is simply the assurance that she is not alone. Assurance is a word spoken, a hand held, from the outside in.

Of course some assurances can be false. Well-meaning people offer words of assurance that ring hollow. Untrustworthy people give assurances that often have more to do with their hope for the future than with ours. All of us have voted for one or two of them along the way. I also think it is the case that when we are most vulnerable, we are more likely to throw in our lot with the assurance we most want to hear rather than the assurance we most need to hear. Nevertheless, says the preacher, faith is the assurance of things hoped for.

Then there is conviction—what Webster defines as “a strongly held belief.” Conviction issues from inside out. It is Martin Luther’s “Here I stand, I can do no other” and Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s “Whoever I am, thou knowest O God, I am thine.” Often conviction is formed in the crucible of fiery trials and deep waters where you come to trust in your heart or know in your bones that you are being accompanied in the valley of the shadow. You see nothing. You hear nothing. You can prove nothing. All you can do with conviction is say, “I believe.”

Yet the distance between the assurance coming toward you from the outside in and the conviction that is rising up from the inside out is a leap. It is faith.

So it was with Abram in the fifteenth of Genesis. “After these things,” our lesson begins, inviting us to look back before we read on. At the beginning of Abram’s story, God commands him to leave country and kindred and his father’s house and go to the land God will show him. “I will make of you a great nation,” God promises, “and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.” A word of assurance. From the outside in. “Abram went, as the Lord had told him.” He was 75 when he and Sarai and Lot set out for they knew not where. They survived a famine in Egypt because Abraham let Pharaoh bed Sarai as if she were Abram’s sister. After the famine they were blessed with riches. Along the way, Abram receives yet another assurance from God that God will give him all the land that he can see and offspring as numerous as the dust. So Abram journeys on, defeating the four kings of the East and rescuing Lot who had been taken captive. It is “after these things” that God gives Abram a third word of assurance, an assurance that anticipates Abram’s state of mind: “Do not be afraid, Abram,” God says, “I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.”

After these things, Abram is not buying it! So he asks God for evidence in the face of Sarai’s continued barrenness: “What will you give me, for I continue childless?” Childless except for a son born to Sarai’s slave whom Abram and Sarai never call by name—a whole other sermon that I now have literally no time left to preach! In response to Abram’s doubt, rather than telling him to look down to the dust from whence he came, God tells Abram to look up. “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. So shall your descendants be.” Next sentence? Abram “believed the Lord and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.” Whoa! Hold on. Now I am not buying it!

According to Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, a most amazing reader of Torah, there is so much more going on in Abram’s story with God—which is to say, there is more going on in our own stories with God--than meets the eye. Zornberg first reminds us, in a chapter on the “Travails of Faith,” that “Abraham’s active spiritual life begins and ends...in indeterminacy,” in not knowing. “Go...to the land *that I shall show you*,” God says at the beginning of the

conversation. And at the end God says “Sacrifice your son...on one of the mountains *that I shall tell you.*” Abram obeys. From beginning to end, precisely because God does not reveal to Abram his destination, a conversation and so a relationship and ultimately a trust develops. That is to say—and honestly, I think you should move to the edge of your seats to hear this: “where there is total revelation, there is no room for language.” Put another way, where there is complete certainty, there is no room for assurance, for promise, for conversation, for the relationship of trust that is faith to grow between creature and Creator. “In the veiling of truth (in the indeterminacy of our destination, in hiding the future from our knowing),” Zornberg acknowledges that “there is distress for a human being, who wants to know clearly what is God’s will. [Yet] this distress generates an intense receptivity to every shred of communication that comes from God.”

If you were in the sanctuary last Sunday, you know something of what Zornberg means. When I sat down and looked at you looking at me “after all these things” in El Paso and Dayton, there was a palpable sense that we had been called out of our individual existence and into worship as a people intensely receptive to every shred of communication that might come from God. Something of our hope for our life together had been shattered by armed human hatred yet again. We were in distress. We are in distress. We want to know clearly what is God’s will. Yet lacking total revelation, there is room for language, for the assurance of God hidden in the words of Scripture and in the Word that became flesh in the fullness of time.

However, if it has happened too many times that you are wrestling with the indeterminacy of your own destiny because your body has let you down once again or your heart is breaking or whatever it is that you thought you could count on has disappeared at some turn in the road, you may be saying with Abram, “I am NOT buying your assurance this time, God.” Still, God says to you who are receptive precisely because of your vulnerability, “Look up to the heavens and the stars I created. Let’s talk. Let’s keep talking eternally because you are mine and I am yours.”

But there is a second reason God does not fully reveal Abram’s destination. God’s hides the future in order to preserve Abram’s sanity “which might crack under too sudden and too brutal a statement...It is characteristic of God’s relation with the righteous,” one commentator says, “that [God] allows them time for questioning and wonder, and only reveals the determined reality...afterwards, ultimately.” The word for that in Hebrew, *mat-heh*, means “to wonder, gaze, be astonished, be plunged into a sense of the unfathomable.” I think that is why God tells Abram to look up to the heavens, placing his present distress in a wholly other context--which is to say, in the holy context of God’s eternity. I desperately need that holy context now lest, in the face of the news day after day, I abandon all hope. But what of the indeterminate distance in time, I wonder, between assurance and conviction. If faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen, how do we get from here to there?

The unfortunate thing about the few verses of Abram’s story we read today is that Abram’s response of belief appears to be instantaneous. I suspect this is one of those places in Scripture where the rabbis believe God included an unwritten pause meant to draw us in, making us “exiles-in-time” where “selves are born.” “In this condition,” Zornberg writes, “where nothing is assumed...a radical astonishment abides...an intense listening—and ‘afterwards’—revelation.”

Truth be told, the afterwards can last a whole lifetime. The word for that time in Hebrew is *hiba*: “the unmapped space and time, that we call freedom, in which to nurture love. *Hiba*,” Zornberg concludes, “is the organic relation that is developed in spite of, or perhaps only because of the vicissitudes and travails of a world in which God does not reveal His meanings.” So in the meantime [says Frank Kermode], we are left to “interpret [God’s word] always as transients.” As strangers and sojourners who seek a homeland.

“But can’t you even imagine what it must feel like to have a true home?” asks the preacher in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*. “...Not some fortress you bought and built up and have to keep everybody locked in or out. A real home. Not some place you went to and invaded and slaughtered people to get. Not some place you claimed, snatched because you got the guns. Not some place you stole from the people living there, but your own home, where if you go back past your great-great-grandparents, past theirs, and theirs, past the whole of Western history, past the beginning of organized knowledge, past pyramids and poison bows, on back to when rain was new, before plants forgot they could sing and birds thought they were fish, back when God said Good! Good!-- there, right there where you know your own people were born and lived and died. Imagine that...That place. Who was God talking to if not to my people living in my home?”

"You preaching, Reverend."

"No, I'm talking to you.... I'm talking to you."

I'm *talking* to you for just a little while longer, speaking in a way that means to make it clear we are seeking a homeland.

Thanks be to God.