



The Rev. Edward Perkinson

Proper 14 Abreviated
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Those 6 verses we heard read as our Old Testament lesson this morning may in fact be the oldest statement of Abrahamic faith we have. And that would be the faith from which Judaism, Islam and Christianity are derived.

Look more closely with me at the movement of these verses. Ready??

There is God's promise. There is Abraham's protest. He doubts that such a promise can be accomplished. There is God's response. A double statement of assurance. There is Abraham's acceptance.

The whole exchange is one of sharpness and simplicity and clarity. The faith to which Abraham is called is not a peaceful, pious acceptance. It is a hard fought and deeply argued conviction. Abraham will not be a passive recipient of the promise. His freedom in the face of God is not unlike the freedom of the creation. God says "Let there be" and there was. This God invites and permits. This God will not coerce. Abraham is no more forced to faith than the creation was forced to exist.

Abraham's first response is a disbelieving protest, even a lament. The second response is an act of faith. He trusts the promise of God. He is willing to leave the closed world of barrenness for the open future of God. The question is what was it that moved Abraham from the one to the other?

Perhaps this. Abraham has abandoned a reading of reality which is measured by what he can see and touch and manage. He now can imagine a future that will be new and not derived from the present barrenness. He believes that God can cause a break point between the exhausted present and the buoyant future.

The new pilgrimage of Abraham is not grounded in the old flesh of Sarah nor the tired bones of Abraham, but in the experience of openness and possibility and limitlessness. He trusts God's future and lives assured of that future even in a closed and barren present.

The new Righteousness or rightness that is his. The full humanness that is his and that he was created for means that he can now let go of what is; for the sake of a "new creation". The old has passed away, the new has come. All this is from God... we might become the fully human people of God." (II Cor. 5: 17-21)

Those are the words of Paul and you and I are the people of St. Paul. We are Paul's people. All of us have had a closed future of sickness or fear or misery or doubt. And all of us have abandoned that closed situation or are longing to leave it so that we might be ready recipients of newness, of hope and of the future of God.

And this brings us to our Gospel lesson for today. Jesus begins his conversation the same way God begins God's conversation with Abraham. "Do not be afraid. God is with you and God has a gift for you."

So be ready. "Be dressed for action, have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks."

Then there is that unexpected twist, or reversal, or that turning things upside down. Jesus almost always seems to put that into his conversations about the experience of making God's dream a reality.

When the master finds his slaves alert and ready, "he fastens his belt, tells his slaves to sit down at table and he serves them a meal. He waits on them.

Remember I said a little earlier, It is a common element of all three faiths, that those who believe the promise and hope in the face of barrenness; still must live with the barrenness. That is true of all of us. That is how it is for the people of St. Paul's And Jesus is telling us to be ready for at any moment, in any place, we might find ourselves in an experience that would move us out of our barrenness and into the future of hope and promise. An experience that would turn our world upside down.

Jesus talked about that kind of experience in his time in his way. In our time I might talk about such an experience this way. These are the wonderings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: "What if you slept? And what if, in your sleep, you dreamed? And what if, in your dream you went to heaven and plucked a strange and beautiful flower? And what if, when you awoke, you had the flower in your hand? Ah, what then? "

There is a man named William Miller who is the Distinguished Professor of Psychology and psychiatry at the University of New Mexico. His specialty is the psychology of spiritual experience.

He works with and writes about people who were dressed and ready for action. Who were ready to open the door even before the knock came. Who believed the promise; Don't be afraid. God is with you. And God has a gift for you. People who woke up with a flower in their hand.

What people who have these experiences repeatedly say is that the experience is not what is important. What is important is that you are changed. I am quoting now" If a spiritual experience is real, it will transform you. Fling your worldview and priorities, your relationships and your personality up in the air like a two year old hurling a deck of cards.

And the closed, dry, dead, barrenness of your life is gone and the future is open and more alive than you have ever imagined. There is a sense of oneness with all that is, peace, love, and the conviction that the experience was more real than everyday life, and all of life is experienced as a gift.

As the people of St. Paul it is important for us to remember that Paul's experience happened near Damascus. And as his people we continue to prepare and ready ourselves for our own transforming experience that could happen on any corner or in any room, or any hill or field, or any Sunday or any day of the week or any time of day or night

And staying in community, Paul's community, which means talking to one another about these experiences and our longing for them is how we make ourselves most ready and available for them. Do not be afraid, God is with you. And God has a gift for you. Amen