

Date: March 4, 2007

SUNDAY: Lent 2

SERMON: Faithful Pilgrims

Text(s): Genesis 15; Luke 13:31-35

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While we often think of the Middle Ages in Europe as being a long time ago—consigned to the realm of ancient history—the experience of living in Europe taught us otherwise. Everywhere we went, it seemed, we were rubbing shoulders with the Middle Ages. Like the photograph I took of the sign for a “Century 21” real estate office on a half-timbered house built in Century 15.

Another way we often found ourselves thrust back into the Middle Ages was when we visited old churches built in the medieval period, only to discover that they were located on ancient pilgrimage routes, and that those old routes of pilgrimage were still very much alive to modern-day pilgrims, both for religious pilgrims and for tourists purposes. A driving vacation south through the Pyrenees and then along the old pilgrimage route across northern Spain to Santiago de Compostela, proved to be so inspirational to my wife as we watched many modern pilgrims walking the route as they did in the Middle Ages, with the scallop shell of St. James hanging from their backpacks, that she has informed me that one of our retirement projects will be to go back and walk that route ourselves. We’re still negotiating that one. As usual, one of my concerns is will I have room or will I be able to carry the requisite camera equipment along with everything else? Stay tuned.

In our Old Testament lesson, we meet up with a man named Abraham, who along with his wife Sarah, felt compelled to begin a pilgrimage in their retirement. Abraham and Sarah had been city-dwellers in Ur of the Chaldees, somewhere north of the present-day city of Baghdad. In response to what he understood to be God’s call, Abraham, who was nearly 90, pulled up stakes from his city, from his tribe, from his extended family and network of relationships, and traveled

to some unknown place far away. He got up and “*went out,*” the scripture writer tells us, “*not knowing where he was going.*”

We don’t have to be on a pilgrimage to have the feeling that we’re setting out without knowing where we’re going. For many of us here, coming to live in Maine was something of an exercise in not knowing where we were going. We may have thought we knew, perhaps because we had vacationed in Maine and enjoyed it. But being a tourist and actually moving to a place to live are two very different experiences, even when both are good, as most of us transplants have discovered. There’s a certain amount of faith and commitment involved in pulling up stakes and moving somewhere that is not necessary for simply going somewhere on vacation.

In our lesson today, Abraham and Sarah have finally reached the place they’re going, but so far, they’ve seen no sign of the multitude of descendants that God promised them. This was an extremely important matter to them, for a very good reason: because in ancient Hebrew culture, there was no notion of immortality or an afterlife, one lived on only in the memory of one’s descendants. And since Abraham and Sarah have no children, there won’t be any descendants in whose memories they will live on. And both of them are now long past child-bearing age.

But now God comes back into the picture with yet another disturbing message to Abraham. It’s another one of those big promises like the one God made when he called Abraham to leave Ur of the Chaldees and become a pilgrim, traveling to a strange land. This time when God promises Abraham that he is going to give him a great reward, it’s understandable that Abraham is just the least bit skeptical. “*What kind of reward are we talking about, God,*” he asks. “*Seems to me, I’ve heard promises like this before, and look what’s happened. I still have no children to keep my name and memory alive after I’m gone, and an adopted slave is now my only heir.*” Good question, isn’t it? And who could fault Abraham for asking it?

When God replies, he does not really answer Abraham's challenge. God doesn't explain. He simply asks Abraham to look up into the starry heavens, and he says to him, "*Abraham, if you can number the stars, that's how numerous your descendants are going to be. The slave Eliezar will not be your heir. A son of your own loins will be your heir.*" Interesting tactic, isn't it? God answers a challenge about his apparent failure to make good on his promise by making another promise. On the face of it, given Abraham and Sarah's age, this promise is simply ridiculous.

And what's even more ridiculous is that for reasons known only to himself, Abraham believes God again. P. T. Barnum would have loved this man! He actually trusts God to make good on this grand and ludicrous promise. The narrator sums it up in a luminous sentence that expresses the very essence of all biblical religion. "*And Abraham trusted God, and God counted it as righteousness.*" That word translated "trust" or "believe" or "faith," is the Hebrew word *emunah*, which literally means "to support someone." It is not faith or belief as intellectual or mental assent to a doctrine or a theological concept. There's nothing abstract about faith in this biblical sense. It's a term of relationship. In fact, the emphasis in the Hebrew word *emunah* is not on God's ability to support Abraham. It's Abraham who has faith, who supports God by trusting himself and his future to God the way we support another person when we marry them or support a deep friendship by trusting ourselves to the other person. And that is the bedrock of the relationship between God and human beings. The right relationship to God is a relationship of complete trust of ourselves and our future to God, even when, to all appearances, there is no good reason for doing so, and may even be a hundred good reasons for not taking such a risk. When the prophet Hosea and later, St. Paul, and even still later, Martin Luther said, "*The righteous shall live by faith,*" this is precisely what they

meant.

It is only after Abraham's act of trust, that God then appears to him in a dream in which God undertakes to be bound by a solemn covenant of the type that was practiced in the ancient Near East. But, and here's the fly in the ointment, in this dream God tells Abraham that this multitude of descendants are themselves going to become slaves in a foreign land. They will live in Egypt, among the Egyptians, but not of them, witnessing to the God who brought them into being, and because of that distinctiveness and that witness, they will draw upon themselves oppression and enforced bondage. But eventually, God will liberate them and bless them as he has promised.

Which means, for Abraham, at least, that there's no point except the very beginning, in the birth of his son Isaac, at which he will actually see the fulfillment of God's promise. He will continue to have to live as a pilgrim; every day will be a day of getting up and going out without knowing where he is going. There will never be a day when he does not need to support God by living and acting in such ways that demonstrate his trust that God is working even when all appearances suggest that God is absent. He will not live to see the multitude of descendants. He will not live to see them become a great nation. But he's asked to go on supporting God by trusting himself and his family to God anyway. And amazingly, he does.

In our gospel lesson, Jesus identifies himself as a similar faithful pilgrim who trusts God, even when he cannot foresee the outcome, and even in spite of all appearances to the contrary.

That kind of faithful support, faithful trusting of himself to God, is what's going on in Jesus' response to the Pharisees' warning that King Herod is trying to kill him. He insists that he's going to be faithful to his work of teaching and healing regardless of the threat. In his lament over Jerusalem, he acknowledges that he is unlikely to see any positive results of his

faithfulness. In fact, he accepts the likelihood of his own death. And yet (and here's where we see his faith, his trust), he says, "*Go and tell that weasel Herod that today and tomorrow I'm going to continue doing what I'm called to do, and on the third day, I finish my work.*" No early Christian reader of this gospel could have missed that reference to "the third day" as a reference to the resurrection. Even when, to all appearances, all that he was going to get for his troubles was a rough wooden cross on a hill outside Jerusalem. Jesus, like Abraham, supported God by trusting himself to God, and that was the right thing to do.

I suggest to you, that here in these texts, we have the pattern for what it means to be Christians in this world. We are a community called into being by a word from God. By responding to that word in trust, as Abraham did, as Paul did, as Jesus did, we become a body of people whose very identity is that of pilgrims or resident aliens. We are a group of people who do not belong to the world as insiders, nor do we wall ourselves off from the world as outsiders. We are called to be *in* the world but not *of* the world. We are called to support God by witnessing to God's reconciling and re-creating work in the world. We do this by living out that reconciliation in our own relationships with one another and with those outside our community of faith. We are called to engage the world around us in the great issues with which human history confronts us. We must be close enough to the world to speak a prophetic word, close enough to share both the world's pain and its joys. But we do not put our ultimate trust in other people or in history or in social structures or institutions, not even the institution of the Church. We march to the beat of a different drummer; it is to another Lord that we confess our true allegiance, and to that extent, as the old gospel chorus puts it, we can never truly "feel at home in this world anymore."

There's a catch to this calling, however—the same catch there was for Abraham

and Jesus, or for any other prophetic pilgrims like Martin Luther King, Jr., or Mother Teresa or Archbishop Romero or Dorothy Day. We will not always see the fulfillment of God's promises with our own eyes. For it belongs to the very essence of our identity and life that "*we walk by faith and not by sight.*" We live, *as though* God can be trusted to keep his promises to the human race, and we commit ourselves to support God in that work by trusting ourselves to God. But we should not necessarily expect to see the fulfillment of all those promises in the in our lifetimes. We may, if we're particularly blessed, catch a glimpse of them sometimes. But we shouldn't count on that. Faith always takes its departure point from the future, rather than from the present, from what we trust will be rather than our experience of what is. "*We are saved in hope,*" says Paul. Which means, as I take it, that we are like professional gamblers, in a sense. We stake our fortunes on how we envision the outcome of the game, even when the game seems to be going against us.

This makes us strange birds, you see, because this is not the world's way of operating. The world's way is to plan for all contingencies, to control all variables, to nail down everything with absolute certainty. The world's way is to measure and quantify and evaluate, and prove. President Reagan's old slogan about our pact with the Soviet Union on arms control could very well stand as the world's motto, "Trust. . . but verify." It is our task as faithful pilgrims to demonstrate that it is possible to live by another motto, "Trust, and leave the outcome to God," even when we cannot foresee or envision the outcome.

This, in fact, is a prophetic message, and we should not be surprised if the world receives it no more gratefully than it received the message of Jesus himself, or of any of the ancient prophets or the contemporary prophets of our own time. People who live wholly by faith, by trust, are dangerous because they demonstrate a life that is

radically free. And really free people are a danger. If we are free, then we can open our arms to embrace those who are considered outsiders. We can love those whom our contemporaries name as enemies or who name themselves as our enemies. We can open our hearts and arms to both insiders and outsiders and draw them together in a unity that neither understands, nor necessarily desires. We can dare to be peacemakers in situations of conflict. But while that freedom may disconcert the citizens of this world, and even provoke outright hostility, it also offers the world the only possibility of a future.

So we live with our feet firmly on the ground in this world, but always with our bags packed and ready to move in trusting response to God's call and leading, even when we cannot see or control the outcome. That is what it means to be faithful Christians.