

Belief, Faith, Trust

Genesis 15:1-18 Luke 13:31-35
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Rev. Kathy Speas

Have you been to the top floor of MOMA? It is all glass, completely clear. Even though you KNOW it is perfectly safe, you still feel queasy stepping out on it. And there's a Skywalk over the Grand Canyon where you can stand out there and look down 4,000 feet into the Colorado River. Imagine that! You'd feel like the coyote, chased over the canyon by Roadrunner. I've heard people say, "No way I could go out there."

That must have been how Abram felt, setting out in response to God's call, going out into the desert. This is the journey of faith – stepping out, looking down, you've read the Book that explains that you are safe, but you don't FEEL safe.

Abram is often held up as the model of perfect faith for Christians and Jews and Muslims to emulate – without question, he left a really good life in Haran when God told him to go, and he lets God lead through Shechem, Moreh, Bethel, Ai, into Egypt to escape a famine, into the Negev desert, then he has to rescue Lot, there are all kinds of battles – and for what? For God's promises, which reach beyond Abram's lifetime, beyond his imagination. "I will make of you a great nation." "To your offspring I will give this land." All the land you see, I will give to you and your offspring forever." I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if you can count the dust of the earth, your offspring can be counted."

So by now, Abram is beginning to have his doubts. Wouldn't you? God promises him the stars and the moon into all eternity – but can't even manage the most basic and easiest of blessings – to father one child. Abram is not filled with sure faith right here -- but he does the sacrifice ritual anyhow. It is a covenant ceremony that evolved from ancient oracle rituals meant to invoke dreams.

Swedenborg says that the ritual of splitting the birds and animals has to do with changes in the particular states of the church, moving from purely external worship to internal worship. He writes that "what was signified by each particular kind would be too tedious to explain here." And when Swedenborg tells you something is too tedious to explain, he really means it.

But I think the historic significance of this ritual is as important as the spiritual. "I don't really know if you're going to bless me or not, but I'll do this ritual, because I am a Jew, that's who we are as a people, and this is what covenanted people do." Today is Purim, and Jews all over the world are celebrating with rituals as old as the story of Esther. We come to church, say the Lord's Prayer, take communion, even when we feel disconnected from faith, from God, from Jesus. Because ritual has immense

power. I'm sure we all have lots of questions about America, patriotism, America's place in the world -- but raise your hand if you have never, eaten grilled food on July 4?

And then we have Jesus' faith – he is encouraged by the Pharisees, who otherwise were after him, to avoid death by Herod's hands. Jesus is so far beyond his own skin, his own life, he is certain of God's plan and his part in it. "I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work." He knows the mother hen will ultimately win over the fox. He has no problem walking into certain death, because he knows it is God's will. God's inexorable will, which Shall Be Fulfilled. Period. Like Abram, a promise that won't be fulfilled for Jesus in his lifetime. And just as inexorable, our human tendency to limit ourselves to our own skins, our own time and place, our own future. We are bound to listen to something other than the voice of God – in our spiritual life, in our social and civic life, in our political life, in our "Jerusalem." To kill the prophets who call us beyond our own lives, our own skins.

So, the moral is – you should trust more, believe more, have more faith. You don't have enough faith, O ye of little faith, just have more faith.

Now I have two problems with this:

One – people I encounter who know God's will, trust completely, and have certain faith that God has told them what to do – these people scare me. "God wants us to take these Indian children from savage parents." "AIDS is God's judgment." "God told me to attack Iraq." Swedenborg tells us that anyone who is sure of victory is not in temptation, and therefore not in the process of regeneration. I believe that. Anyone who is not Jesus who acts as sure as Jesus is suspect in my book.

Two – I can't just will myself to have more faith. I can't just decide to believe something I don't believe. As Kahlil Gibran says, "Faith is an oasis that the caravan of reason cannot reach."

What loaded words. Faith. Belief. Are you a believer? Or a non-believer? She married Outside of the Faith. Same faith. Different faiths. "Our" beliefs. "Their" beliefs.

Christianity has been shattered by differences in belief. One web source estimates that there are 34,000 Christian denominations. "Believe" came to mean "accept as true" only in recent centuries, as reason and scientific observation took precedence over mysticism and faith as the predominant ways of knowing. Original Greek manuscripts of Biblical texts referring to belief and faith use words that mean trust, loyalty, engagement, and commitment. The English word "believe" is related to the German for love, "liebe," and to the Latin "libido." The word "creed" derives from "Cor

Do,” or “I give my heart.” Spirituality is more about what we love and trust and are committed to than about what we think is true. “Semper Fi(delis)” – Always Faithful – reflects a commitment to military mission, not agreement with foreign policy.

So, what do I believe? What is the God I am engaged with, committed to? What do I trust? Good question!

I trust:

- Cycles -- of birth and death and life again in new form. Rain falls, nourishes life, evaporates, and it falls again. Leaves bud and grow and fall and turn to dirt that nourishes the tree. In breath – out breath. The universe is regenerative. I believe in The God who Makes All Things New-

I trust:

- That everything – everything – will get used, somehow. People make art out of trash they find on the streets. Garbage can be recycled, composted. The worst mistakes can sometimes set the greatest good into motion. Tell me stories about extraordinary second chances. I believe in God the Redeemer.

I trust:

- The interconnectedness of all things. Like Swedenborg says, “Nothing Unconnected ever occurs.” Synchronicity. Karma. The earth’s ecology, which is one body of water on one planet with one atmosphere, not some lakes or skies which it is OK to pollute because they are far away. Spiritual ecology, which says we are all little waves arising from the same ocean. I believe in the One God.

I trust:

- Whatever it is that makes things gratuitously beautiful. Beyond the beauty of the seasons and the complexity of music and art, I worship whatever it is that surprises us with joy, or courage, or the fright thing to say or do. I believe in Inspiration – the very word means breath, spirit.

But mostly, faith is like obscenity – I can’t define it, but I know it when I see it. Faith is pretty meaningless unless it is lived. I’ve seen some striking faith stories recently.

On Ash Wednesday, I went to Catholic Mass. I wanted my friend Father Mike Kelly to put the ashes on my head, so I went to Mass. All the school kids from St Francis Solano were there, plus a good flock of worshippers from Sonoma. Father Mike talked about the Meaning of Giving Things Up for Lent. He asked all the kids, "Are you giving up candy? TV? The Internet? Video games? Soda pop?" and talked about the spiritual significance of clearing out our pleasures and making room for God. Right afterwards, I went to visit a hospice patient and her husband (who I knew to be devout Christians, so I wouldn't have to explain the ashes). She's in her 50s, she has Lou Gehrig's disease and something called Pick's disease, which is a frontal lobe deterioration that you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy. She's not going to live until Easter, mainly because she can't swallow anymore, so she's slowly starving to death. Now THIS is Lent. They feel like their faith is really helping them through this, but it's not a comforting thing. It's not a sense that God will bless them, or even a sure sense that God is working some bigger plan, and they sure doesn't believe that prayer could take this disease away. They are just peaceful. Even though the worst thing in the world is happening, it will be OK. She's gonna die, and that's OK. He's gonna be widowed, but somehow, he knows he'll get through it. I think of them when I read Helen Keller speaking of "the faith wrought into life apart from creed or dogma," -- "Even if my vital spark should be blown out, I believe that I should behave with courageous dignity in the presence of fate, and strive to be a worthy companion of the beautiful, the good, and the true."

The other image of faith I've seen recently that will stick with me a long time is seeing Lindsay Vonn ski. Did you see that? Here's this beautiful young athlete, who has trained since childhood to ski in the Olympics, they show her at the top of the downhill run, and she is shaking like a leaf. This was not someone supremely confident, with a winner's attitude. I don't know about her faith life, but she did not look like someone confident that God would make her triumphant. She was trembling, and looked like it was all she could do not to burst into tears. And then she won the Gold medal, and sobbed and sobbed and sobbed. And the next day, she looked just as scared, and didn't even make it through the slalom course, and someone who had totally frozen on the downhill that Lindsay won, won the Gold on the slalom. And Lindsay was totally philosophical about it. "Well I skied as well as I could." Faith is not what makes you win, or even what guides you to the finish line. It's what pushes you through the race.

So there you have it. That's my faith, my belief. What's yours?