

Proper 14, Year C
August 8, 2010
St. Michael and All Angels, Portland
The Rev. Deacon Gabriel Lamazares

Genesis 15:1-6 and Psalm 33:12-22 • Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 • Luke 12:32-40

“And he *believed* the LORD; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness.”

w'he'emin b'adonai. Our story is ancient, strange voices echoing down the years in words we sometimes hardly understand. In Hebrew, “And he believed the LORD” sounds like this: *w'he'emin b'adonai*.

Here's a story about believing. Names have been omitted to protect the innocent and the guilty.

The moving company Terry and I had hired packed up all our worldly possessions and put them into a truck on May 28th with a written, signed promise (in this case, a contract) that, in exchange for the considerable fee they requested, they would deliver them to our home here in Portland by July 19th at the very latest.

Well and good. But as July 19th approached, we checked the status of our move and discovered that our things weren't being loaded into the truck from the storage facility until June 19th. The cleverest among you must have realized that there's no way you can load up a truck in Bayone, New Jersey and deliver to Portland, Oregon in the same day.

Very perceptive. Indeed, our things did not arrive until almost a week later, July 26th. And, as they were unloading the truck, the happy shipper-folk let us know that they had not been able to fit everything on the truck, so our largest pieces of furniture (four bookshelves, our guest bed, and an entire wardrobe box, including my master's degree!) were still in the warehouse in Bayone, New Jersey. They would be delivered at another time to be determined.

As of this past Thursday, August 5th (16 days after delivery was promised) I am happy to report that our things have finally all arrived, more or less in one piece!

We believed in the moving company, and it was accounted to us as foolishness.

But notice: by saying that we *believed* in the moving company, I am not saying that I acknowledged the moving company's existence *or* that what they said about future

events was incontrovertibly true *or* that what others had said about the moving company was true.

What we meant is that we *trusted* the moving company the same way we might trust a bridge: we go out on it, not knowing for sure whether it will hold us safe above the roiling waters below, but trusting that it will hold firm and we'll make it to the other side.

(And to give credit where credit is due, though there were bumps in the road with the moving company, they still delivered everything to us in the end. We may have gotten stuck in traffic at the Burnside bridge and been late to our next appointment, but we made it to the other side. The substance, if not the letter, of the agreement was fulfilled.)

When Abram believes God, believes *in* God, Abram makes a decision to make a covenant with God because he is willing to bet everything on God's *sturdiness*, God's *faithfulness*. God is shield, deliverer, guarantor. What else would drive a man who was not young anymore—no, not by a long shot—to leave his kin, his land, his ancestors' bones buried in the earth and his father's gods to go off to God-knows-where to live in tents on the edges of a foreign land, holding only a vision in twilight of grains of sand and stars in the sky and a God who cannot be seen or touched or held?

In the covenant with Abram, God promises to make of Abram's children a great nation, numberless, and to give them a land for their posterity, a place on the earth for Abram's children to call their own. Through Abram's children, all the clans of the earth will be blessed.

But here's the kicker: the wager is real. Abram and Sarai will leave behind their names. They will never return to Ur. Decades will pass as they wander and struggle and behave badly between the giving of the promise and the birth of Isaac. They will both die without knowing if God will ultimately fulfill the covenant. For better or worse, the covenant transforms their lives, the world, and yes, even God, for good.

What if the moving company took fifty years to deliver our things? Would we still be waiting for them?

We heard from the letter to the Hebrews this morning because Abraham is mentioned prominently in the "roll call of faith" that features prominently in that letter, examples of our ancestors who carried the "conviction of things not seen."

The list is as heart-breaking as it is instructive for who is chosen. Noah, who built a

huge floating box for decades under sunny skies. Abraham and Sarah, who remained childless until long into their old age. Moses, who led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt only to die without setting foot in the Promised Land.

What they have in common is that they sowed seeds without reaping the harvest because they *trusted* in the seed of God's word. They risked and toiled and wandered, made terrible mistakes and kept on going. They went out to a fruitless field every morning and worked and waited, hoping against hope that deep in the dark earth, unseen in the seed and the shoot, the ripe fruit and grain, yes, even the wine and the bread, lay waiting for others to enjoy someday if they but tended the pregnant field.

At the risk of being upstaged by her, let me share with you all a poem by Mary Oliver. It's called "Little Summer Poem Touching the Subject of Faith," and I think it is incomparable and exquisite in its illumination of today's readings.

"Every summer
I listen and look
under the sun's brass and even
into the moonlight, but I can't hear

anything, I can't see anything --
not the pale roots digging down, nor the green
stalks muscling up,
nor the leaves
deepening their damp pleats,

nor the tassels making,
nor the shucks, nor the cobs.
And still,
every day,

the leafy fields
grow taller and thicker --
green gowns lofting up in the night,
showered with silk.

And so, every summer,
I fail as a witness, seeing nothing --
I am deaf too
to the tick of the leaves,

the tapping of downwardness from the banyan feet --
all of it
happening
beyond any seeable proof, or hearable hum.

And, therefore, let the immeasurable come.
Let the unknowable touch the buckle of my spine.
Let the wind turn in the trees,
and the mystery hidden in the dirt

swing through the air.
How could I look at anything in this world
and tremble, and grip my hands over my heart?
What should I fear?

One morning
in the leafy green ocean
the honeycomb of the corn's beautiful body
is sure to be there.”

(From West Wind: Poems and Prose Poems, by Mary Oliver. Published by Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston. Copyright 1997 by Mary Oliver. Reprinted by permission.)

When we say “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, in Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit, the Church, the communion of saints, the resurrection of the dead,” we do not assent to a list of hypotheses about reality or cling to an ancient world-view or even our own vision of how the world should be.

What we mean is that, “surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,” we are willing to step out on the bridge of God’s word of love, that we trust in “the honeycomb of the corn’s beautiful body” even though we can’t see it or hear it and may never. That trust is the foundation of all our covenants from Abraham to Moses to the baptismal covenant through which we come to belong to Christ to marriage vows and ordination vows. We make our promises and lay down our wagers holding firm to God’s vision of the corn’s beautiful body lying hidden in the earth. Even when our vows go awry and we endanger the promises because we’re only human, the covenant changes us for good.

w’he’emin. Do you remember the Hebrew from the beginning? It sounds pretty foreign, doesn’t it? Yet we say a form of it in our every liturgy, at the end of every prayer. *Amen* comes from this Hebrew root. Whenever we say it, at the end of a prayer, when

we receive the body of Christ, the bread of heaven at this table, we affirm the sturdiness of God's promises and step out in faith.

Amen, God loves the world.

Amen, God wants to bless all the nations and families of the earth.

Amen, God is making all things new.

Amen, God will take up the fragments of our lives and feed whoever hungers.

Amen, God will raise and sanctify our bodies and all they've suffered and borne.

Amen, God's harvest of justice awaits in the earth, even when I can't see it.

Amen, there is a sun behind the clouds.

One morning

in the leafy green ocean

the honeycomb of the corn's beautiful body

is sure to be there.

Amen. Amen. Amen.