

## Learning to Trust

An old friend of mine named Shayne recently published his first book called The Briarpatch Gospel in which he talks about meeting God in the wildernesses of life. Shayne is a pastor in Atlanta, actually he was my youth pastor when I was a teenager, and he knows a bit about the search for God in the impossible, barren, and prickly places of life. He tells the story in the book of when his five-year-old daughter was diagnosed with childhood leukemia. He talks about when the doctor came in to inform them that what was causing the pain in her back was actually the fact that cancer was eating her vertebrae from the inside out. He writes, "In a split second, someone had pulled the emergency brake of the freight train that had been our life thus far. Loaded with cargo of hope, dreams, and best-laid plans, we were speeding along unencumbered and optimistic about what lay ahead. Now, crushed against the bulkhead, all my aspirations for [my daughter's] future and our family shattered and splintered about me. I labored to breathe."

Shayne and his family spent the next two years as his daughter went through chemo asking questions to God about the future that seemed promised to a vibrant little girl and his difficulty believing she would ever get there. After months of a barrenness of uncertainty, dark nights with bags packed ready to rush to the hospital for another day, the Easter of new life dawned as she went into remission, and she has been healthy ever since. Though the specter of threat always remains, it has been ten years and they dare to dream again. But that didn't change the difficulty of the months he had to rely on a most basic trust in the hope of God's promise that seemed inherent in the joyful life of a little girl. If anything, I think the experience has only increased his inclination to continually questioning the promise amidst his act of obedient faith.

Abraham finds himself in a similar place in today's reading. God had promised him in his old age that he would be the father of a great people. But in this story Abraham is having trouble believing in the possibility, or trusting in the God of the promise. He stands alone, childless in the barren desert, and asks God if his promise is still valid because he doesn't see a way forward to that dream anymore. I'm sure it took some guts to stand there and question God one-on-one, the same God who had brought him out of the land of Ur and saved him many times. So God starts by gently saying, "Do not be afraid. I know it feels like the swords are drawn and the arrows are coming, but I am your shield." Then God says the most reassuring thing. He reminds Abraham who he is dealing with. God says, "I am Yahweh." I am who I am. The same as I was before, when I made that promise, the changeless one who you can count on, and I will keep my promise. God's promise is a sure promise. God is patient even when Abraham is not, because God understands that coming with questions is itself an act of trust, a faithful part of relationship.

Struggle and faith are integral parts of the fulfillment of the promise. God's promises require steadfastness and patient faith. But questions are also part of faith. Abraham doesn't get direct answers to his questions. Instead, he gets a sign of God's gracious overflow. God tells Abraham to look at the stars, and count them if he can. It is God's way of saying, 'I put those in the sky to be your guiding light, more numerous and wonderful than you can imagine, and I will put descendants in your line in the same way.' And Abraham believed. And the bible says his faith was credited to him as righteousness, and when the author of the book of Hebrews tells this story he says Abraham was called the friend of God. For Abraham, faith isn't just about

believing in the abstract, it is a type of trusting that involves his very being and the substance of his life, and it was credited as a form of action. This was Abraham's job - to trust. And then God does the most amazing thing, the part of the story that might need the most explanation.

God gets Abraham to gather a bunch of animals, and cut them in half. This was an ancient way of marking a covenant. The animals were laid on either side of a path, and the two parties walked side-by-side through the middle of them to symbolically say, "If I fail to keep my end of this bargain, may I be torn in two like these animals." But after Abraham has prepared the space, God puts him to sleep. And in the verses that are skipped by the lectionary, God assures him that he will fulfill his promise, but that before his descendants can inherit the land God has prepared for them, they must go through slavery in Egypt. In other words, things will get worse before they get better, but keep faith, because the promise is still true. Then, the symbol of God, the holy fire, passes between the animals to declare that God will be faithful as well. It's extraordinary because it's a one-sided covenant - while Abraham sleeps, God acts. The very blessing that Abraham is asking for, is the very thing that God wants done. So God acts, and it is up to Abraham to hold faith amidst his questions.

This is a perfect Lenten story. Lent is about teaching us to live in the wildernesses of life, whether you are currently in one or not, because they are a part of the human journey. It's about teaching us to ask the questions that need asking when the promise of God seems so illusory. It's about teaching us to search the barren landscape for the signs of life that God offers. It's about teaching us that faith is an action.

In Lent we learn to trust that God will be there. We learn to trust in the promise of Easter through the barrenness of the forty days, and the darker nights of Holy Week, because that is the only path to Easter dawn. The Son of Man must suffer and die to rise again. The disciples thought this was anathema, but it was the only way the story could be told, and we practice living through it because it has parallels in our own lives.

Like trusting God to provide in the time of unemployment when the money starts to dry up. The house may even eventually go, but you can believe that you have a calling, a purpose for which your passions and skill set allow you to meaningfully contribute to the world and it is out there. Or, trusting God when the treatment begins to seem worse than the illness. When energy wanes and you are not sure you can endure, you find rest in the idea that healing is indeed a reality in our world. Or more like Abraham, trusting God when your children are lost and you are not sure of their future. When potential seems wasted and possibilities evaporating, you have faith that God loves your children as much as you do, and they are not as lost to him as they seem to you. Christ is like the mother hen, gathering her chicks beneath the safety of her wings and your little chicks will not be left out.

These are the desert times of life when the promise seems elusive and its God ephemeral and you start to question. In the desert, you have nothing to offer but your trust in God's faithfulness to God's promise. In the desert, like Abraham, you offer a needy, desperate trust, an utter reliance on God, and that is credited as righteousness. It is reckoned as friendship with God.

So this Lent let us learn how to stand in the wilderness and still look to the coming Easter, even if it lies on the far side of Holy Week. When you are full of doubt and bombarded with questions, go out into the cold dark night and look up at the stars. Count them, number them if you can, and when you are done, you will know the breadth of God's promise. In the dark stillness of night, the light of God passes through and the voice that breaks the silence says, "I keep my promises, follow me on to Easter morning." Amen