

A Lent 02

20 March 2011 St Michaels Studio City

RCL Genesis 12.1-8 and John 3.1-17

### Courage

“That takes guts.” That phrase from my boyhood rises more and more into my mind these days when I read the stories in the Bible. “That takes guts,” with all the boyish hero worship the phrase implies. I begin to see the people involved in God’s adventure as real people in real-life situations rather than as one-dimensional plaster saints just waiting around for God to speak and then rushing right out to do what God wants. What I see over and over again is a courage that I could only wish to emulate.

A case in point is seventy-five-year-old Abram and Sarai. Their life is not perfect – they are childless in a culture that valued children enormously – but they have a good life in the city of Haran. They are wealthy and respected and comfortable. And they are old: the body no longer has the strength and stamina of the young and the spirit’s life-task at this point is consolidation of experience and the growth of wisdom rather than the exploration and aggrandizement of youth.

Into this domestic comfort and stability steps the God of the stars and suns in some kind of mystical encounter with Abram. Scripture is laconic with its “The Lord said to Abram...” That encounter alone must have been terrifying, not to mention the demand that God makes to forsake it all for the unknown. “Trust me,” is what God says in effect, and again with stupefying simplicity Scripture says that Abram “obeyed and left.” I long for a really good novelist to write about this old man’s encounter with God, a skilled writer to fill in the blanks. What was Abram thinking and feeling? What about Sarai? Let us feel the terror, the uncertainty, the ridicule of their family, the threat of a future exposed to the vagaries of a world without friends. That Abram and Sarai said yes is truly dumbfounding. Had it been me, I would have run as hard as I could in the opposite direction; there is more of Jonah than of Abram in me.

What courage! The pages of Scripture are littered with women and men who had similar encounters and trusted the One they encountered. There’s Moses, an insecure stutterer contented with family life in his father-in-law’s compound: Moses, called to leave it all and take on the burden of leadership, taking a recalcitrant people through a desert to a land promised to them but filled with warlike inhabitants. There are the Hebrew women in comfortable exile in Babylon who leave it all after eighty years of life and home and children in this greatest of ancient cities to go to the city of their ancestors: forsaken, destroyed, and desolate Jerusalem, and there build a new life. There’s Mary, simple village girl soon to be wed to the local carpenter, called to accept a pregnancy from the divine, a hasty marriage, and a life-time of pursed lips and catty comments.

Then there is Jesus. Called from the domestic pleasure of village life to comfort His people and oppose the religious leadership of his day, seeing from the beginning where that must ultimately lead (for I think that is what the temptation in the desert was all about), living three years shadowed by the cruel arms of a Roman cross, finally facing the moment of decision in the Garden of Gethsemane and sweating blood in order to arrive at acceptance – isn't this courage breath-taking?

That this man Jesus is also God got in the way of my appreciation. I think my subconscious picture was of majestic assurance in the face of terrible suffering, assurance stemming from divine knowledge and divine incapability of suffering and death, whatever might befall Him in the human dimension. Now I see that for Jesus' sacrifice to make any sense for us who must emulate Him, His human experience had to be purely human, not short-circuited by some access to the divine that you and I don't have. So the Jesus who lived in the shadow of the cross and made that decision to stay the course in the Garden of Gethsemane (surely the location is an echo of another Garden, in Eden, where human beings failed what God had asked of them) – this Jesus had to be as purely and unsupportedly human as you and I are as we make our daily decisions. To have any meaning for us as man and messiah, His unsupported courage must match and surpass our own. It did.

I find it amazing that I've lived all these years without seeing the incredible, admirable courage involved in doing what God wants.

So you see we are not alone in the work we must do and the lives we must lead. We may not be called to lead a mass of people across the desert to a new home, we may not be called to rebuild a city from scratch, we may not be called to climb upon a cross, but what we are called to do is every bit as significant. Whatever our career in life is, we are the people who live our lives to the best of our ability with what God supplies. We are asked to leave the comfort of the familiar and strike out into the unknown. We are asked to bear one another's burdens. We are asked to sacrifice our own comfort, money, time, and talent for the benefit of others. We are asked to suffer and die, not in rebellion against a process we do not understand, but in acceptance of a God who has always been with our people in the midst of their tasks and who will always be with us in the midst of ours. We are asked to trust God.

That is what Jesus is talking about in today's gospel story of His conversation with Nicodemus. We must accept for the living of our lives what He accepted for the living of His: the Spirit of God. We must allow God's Spirit room to blow through our lives, not only in the ways that we want and ask but in the unknown, frightening ways that may feel like spiritual hurricanes rather than the caress of a gentle breeze. God's Spirit has Her own purposes into which we are incorporated. But one of those purposes is our own complete, ultimate welfare, so that we can afford to trust the moving and the blowing of this Spirit, no matter the cost. Like Jesus, we can accept our crucifixion for the sake of the resurrection that invariably follows. We can trust, no matter what, because God's Wind always blows us to a greater city and country, no matter the deserts that we may have to cross to get there.

God's Spirit gives new life. God's Spirit makes us into children of God. (John 3.7-8) That's what the Bible says. That's what I believe.