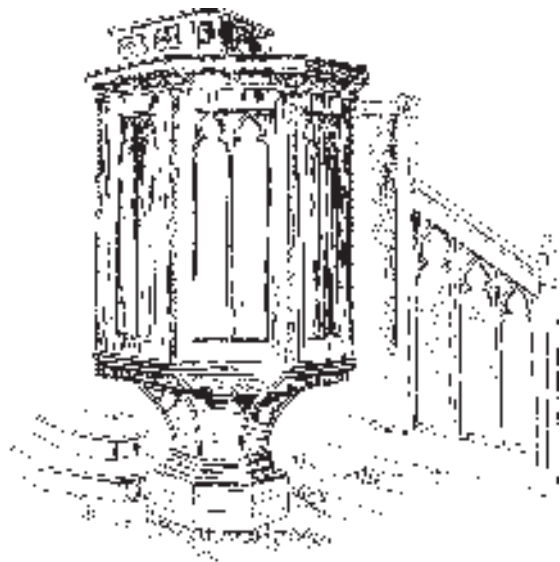


November 15, 2009

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

In Spite of It All

by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Genesis 12:10-20

On the surface, the story has all the elements of a soap opera - like an episode of *The Young and the Restless*: wife-swapping, deceit, adultery, male-chauvinism, mysterious illness, government payoffs. It's certainly not the kind of story you expect to find in the Bible, and with Abraham, of all people, the Father of the Faith, as the central character.

The premise of the story is that to have a beautiful wife while living in a foreign country is a distinct liability. As an alien, you may easily be mistreated and even killed by someone who desires her. But a beautiful sister is another matter. If some rich man wants her for a wife, there is the opportunity of negotiating a big dowry.

What if we filmed this story? For Abraham, we might cast George Clooney as a follow-up to his role in the movie *Oceans Eleven*. Clooney would be perfect because in this story Abraham is a real wheeler-dealer. He does all the wrong things and yet he comes out better than he started!

We might cast Woody Allen as Pharaoh for whom nothing works right. Pharaoh, who seems to have acted in all innocence, ends up with a severe illness afflicting his family and he is short a good many sheep, oxen, donkeys, slaves, and camels. And besides, he is without the new wife who was the cause of it all.

We might have a harder time casting Sarah. What film star is young, beautiful, and a submissive wife? Those characters don't exist anymore. It's hard for us to understand Sarah putting up with Abraham's schemes. We'll have to settle for an unknown for Sarah.

If we were to do it right, we would need the producer and the director of *Law and Order* because behind all the action, deceit, and adventure are real people with real feelings. And like *Law and Order*, this story is one which lifts up real feelings and deals with life in all its sin and grace.

Abraham may come off as the epitome of male chauvinism, but, from the inside, we see something else: terror. The man is afraid; he is in desperate trouble. When he reaches the promised land, he finds famine. People are going hungry. Starvation is imminent. Abraham decides he must do something, not just sit and wait to die. So he folds his tents a second time and with Sarah and his slaves and his flocks and herds, heads south to Egypt. He has heard that Egypt's fields are watered by the Nile and do not depend on rainfall for their fertility, so there he hopes to find food. But he also knows that the Egyptians were notorious for their suspicion of foreigners and their superior attitude to strangers. So he worries, all the way, about what may happen when they arrive. Eventually his worry escalates into blind fear that he may be murdered.

Gripping uncertainty about the future—do you know what that's like?—worry about a new place, a new situation; worry about one's reception by new people—have you ever felt that?—fear which blinds better judgment—can you appreciate that? This is a story for people who know those feelings.

Earlier in chapter 12 of Genesis, just before our story, Abraham receives from Yahweh the "Barith Olam" - the everlasting covenant. Yahweh says to Abraham, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to a land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse, and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves."

Now, this promissory covenant, which requires nothing of the human recipient, but just assures him that God has obligated himself on his behalf, plays a significant role in our story and in fact throughout the Bible.

You see, years before, Abraham and Sarah had gotten off to a good start in Mesopotamia. They had a nice house in the suburbs with a two-car garage and a high definition TV and a nice back deck. With their health and each other and their families behind them, they had what is known as 'a future'. Sarah got her clothes at Nordstrom's, did volunteer work at Miami Valley Hospital, and was a member of The Junior League. Abraham was pulling down an excellent salary for a young man, plus generous fringe benefits and an enlightened retirement plan.

Then they got religion, or religion got them and Abraham was convinced that what God wanted them to do was pull up stakes and head out for Canaan where God had promised that he would make Abraham the father of a great nation, which would in turn be a blessing to all nations. So that's what they did, and that's where their troubles started.

The Promised Land wasn't so promising after all. In fact, there was no Pine Club, no Dorothy Lane Market; instead a famine was in the land. And so Abraham turns his back on Yahweh's promise and heads for Egypt. It is Egypt that is the great nation, not Abraham and his little clan. Abraham

doubts God's promise and tries to work out things his own way. "Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you." Abraham never turns to God in this story: the man who later became famous for his faith appears here as one who cannot trust God to keep his promises. And what are the results of doing things this way?

Abraham is alive and wealthier, but his future, which was to come through Sarah, is cut off. He has made sure, by what he did, that God's promises, which were to be fulfilled by a son born to Sarah, would never come true. Sarah is now in another man's harem, about to become an adulteress. Pharaoh has a new wife, and everybody in the house is sick. Abraham took his destiny into his own hands, and fouled up the lives of everyone around him.

Have you ever given up trusting God and thought: *I'll do it my way*, and then suffered the consequences? This is a story for people who have accepted God's promise, but have had trouble living the promise.

Well, if we are going to film this story, there is one more star we will have to recruit. It would be good if we could hire George Burns to play God one more time. You see, although he is only mentioned once, God as usual is the main character in this biblical story.

The two questions on which the plot turns are these: (1) Will the sojourning man and woman be able to trust God's promise? (2) Will this God keep his promises? The two questions are not the same, but they always come together.

Will the sojourners trust God's promise? Clearly no. They did not. And that disbelief brings death. Will God keep her promise? Unambiguously yes, far beyond any reasonable expectation. The story confirms fully the graciousness of God, while the faithfulness of Israel, in its very first testing, is found wanting. Abraham, the bearer of the promise, is the greatest enemy of the promise.

But even if Abraham cannot trust the promise, the promise is not voided. God will keep the promise in spite of Abraham. What Abraham has upset by his fear and doubt, God puts right again by his grace. That is the gospel in this story. Neither Pharaoh nor Abraham can finally control the power of the promise; God presides over that in God's own free ways.

Is any predicament beyond saving? For us, yes; for God, no. Is there any way we can foul up God's plans for us? Yes, through fear and doubt.

But, is there anything we can do that will ultimately separate us from God's promise, from God's love, from Jesus Christ? No, of that we are assured when we understand that this strange story is not a fantasy - not a segment of *Law and Order* - in reality, this story is our story.

I hope we never experience famine or wife-swapping or any of the other details of this story. But I know that what's really happening in the story does happen to us. We fail God, but God does not fail us. We need the assurance this story gives, that although fear and doubt lead us into trouble, God is still there, still faithful, still loves us, *in spite of it all*.

Let us pray:

In spite of the hate, in spite of the deception, in spite of the fear and the doubt, in spite of all things we do which separate us from you - you hold on to us. You love us with a love that will not let us go. We praise you for that love and that faithfulness and give you thanks. Amen.

The sermon was drawn from:

In Spite of it All, Reclaiming the Old Testament in the Church Pulpit by Gowen
Telling the Truth, by Frederick Buechner
Genesis by Walter Brueggemann