

A CALL TO LIFE
March 14, 2010
Post Christian and Presbyterian Churches
Genesis 15: 1-18

I don't know about you, but I am not always sure that I am doing exactly what God has called me to do. I have always envied people who knew they were doing God's will and unlike Abram's encounter with God, I have never heard God speak directly to me. Other than the unbelievable testimonies I have heard from Holy Roller Christians with a flair for the dramatic or the people I visited at a mental hospital I worked in one summer, I have never met anyone who has heard God's voice. Sometimes I think that the spectacular call stories in the Bible tend to sensationalize our faith and really do more harm than good in furthering our relationship with the Holy One in our midst.

In an article Barbara Brown Taylor wrote for (2/21/2001) **The Christian Century** a few years ago, she shares some of the bizarre call stories she heard when she was reading applications for admission to a Methodist seminary. Rev. Taylor said, "One of the questions on the standard form was, 'Why are you applying to this school of theology?' The answers were often fantastic, many of

them involving car wrecks in which the applicant's narrow escape resulted in a call to preach.

There was one man who enclosed a photo of himself as a child evangelist, all decked out in a white suit with spit-combed blond hair. Someone else had a vision in which Jesus reached out and took her by the hand. But the best was the guy who got out of prison to come for an interview. He had been convicted of armed robbery in Alabama and became a Christian while serving his sentence. Along the way he gained a reputation as a jailhouse preacher and a local church adopted him and pledged to send to school. If the seminary would let him in, he told us, then the parole board would let him out.

In the course of the interview he told us about his crime. It took place at a convenience store. He was just a stupid kid, he said, who had almost changed his mind when a policeman came into the store and saw what was going on. Everyone panicked. Shots rang out and the would-be-thief was hit. It had been years ago, but he clearly still relished telling the tale. Sitting there at that polished oak conference table with a bunch of seminary types, he then pulled up his shirt to show us where the bullet had gone in his belly and out his back. 'That was my burning bush,' he said with a big grin on his face.'"

About 4000 years ago, Abram had his own burning bush experience with God and it too was filled with gore and sensationalism. In our Old Testament lesson God speaks to Abram and makes a covenant with him. His name is still Abram and it is not until a few chapters later in Genesis that God changes his name to Abraham, meaning “father of a multitude.” In today’s story he is just plain old Abram, an elderly Jew without an heir who believes God’s promise of a son and a land, but would prefer proof. “O lord God,” Abram asks, “How am I to know that I shall possess it?”

I don’t know about you, but after reading the gory details of Abram’s covenant with God, I wish Abram had not insisted on proof because proof is what he gets. His proof is a covenant with God that takes place in the middle of the night among a whole barnyard of slaughtered animals. It is a rather bizarre scene to our modern eyes, but it was an accepted way of sealing a covenant in Abram’s day. Take a bunch of good-sized animals, halve them from nose to tail as neatly as you can, clear a path between the pieces, and require each partner to walk between them as a sort of self-curse. According to the ancients, when the halves were laid apart opposite one another, a holy space was created. By passing through the severed bodies of the animals, each partner says, in

effect, “May the same thing happen to me if I do not keep my word.” I guess it is similar to what we promise but never mean when we say, “Cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye.” (Some words and thoughts from Barbara Brown Taylor)

So that is how Abram got himself in partnership with God; an experience we can only wonder about. In a sermon entitled, “**Wed By God**”, Barbara Brown Taylor says, “While we serenely approach an altar stained only with candle wax, Abram waded through blood to get to his, waving his arms at the vultures who made off with an eye or a bit of fur before he could drive the big birds away. Then night fell and Abram dozed off, worn out with the effort of rounding up and butchering the stubborn animals. In the midst of his sleep, Abram saw a pot of fire, a flaming torch, pass between the halves of the slain animals and Abram knew that it was the Lord, keeping his part of the bargain, repeating the promise of descendants for Abram and of a land for them all to live in.”

Although this haunting story seems to be so far from our own experience, it is nonetheless the story of our own beginnings with God as a chosen people. It is full of real life things such as blood and guts, faith and doubt, and fear and promise. God and Abram talk to one another, God tells Abram what to do and he does it,

Abram keeps his part of the covenant, and God comes through with his. In short, Abram is chosen and he knows it.

Genesis 15:6 says, “Abram believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.” One of the commentaries I read said that if we modify the translation slightly, it is possible to read, “And Abram discovered the Lord’s will; and the Lord attributed the discovery to him as righteousness.” Righteousness can be understood as living the humanity that God wishes us to live.

Aren’t we all called to live fully and faithfully the humanity that God wishes us to live? Isn’t this what God calls each of us to do? In that same article about the prisoner with the bullet hole, Barbara Brown Taylor says, “right this minute I cannot think of half a dozen people who believe that they are doing exactly what God has called them to do. The church used to supply people with purpose, but I am afraid that we are going through a little slump right now. Some of our old purposes have run out of steam. If you walk into the average Christian church to explore your call and your purpose in life, chances are that you will come out with an invitation to join the choir or volunteer at the soup kitchen on Tuesdays. It is almost enough to make you envy the guy with the bullet hole!”

She continues, “But don’t blame the clergy anymore than you blame yourself, because the discovery of true purpose is the job of the gathered community—God’s called-out ones—who exist, among others things to remind one another that the lives God is calling us to embrace are the ones that we are living right now, under these present circumstances. Whether you are a sophomore trying to decide on a major or a brain surgeon at the top of your profession, you have everything you need to respond to your divine call. You have what each of us has: one whole life to live on this earth, with tasks in it that we may choose to do well or poorly, and with people in it whom we may lift up by our presence with them or put down by our absence from them.

Every night when we lie down to sleep there is either more life in this world because of us or there is less life in this world because of us. This is true whether or not we have ever seen a burning bush, talked directly to God, or at anytime felt called by God. Our purpose, for God’s sake, is to increase the abundance of life in this world and I believe that each of us has already been called by God to live and magnify the abundant life of God.”

Whenever we are not feeling very spiritual or very faithful and we begin to wonder if we have ever been called by God or question if

we are doing what God has called us to do, then perhaps we need to stop and remember that God has called each of us to increase life in this world on a daily basis by all that we do and by all that we say.

In the book, **My Grandfather's Blessings**, Rachel Remen explains how in the ordinary routines of our days God has called each of us to increase life and bless one another. “Those who bless and serve life find a place of belonging and strength, a refuge from living in ways that are meaningless and empty and lonely. We do not serve the weak and broken; what we serve is the wholeness in each other and the wholeness in life. There are many ways to serve and strengthen the life around us: through friendship or parenthood or work, through kindness, compassion, generosity or acceptance, through philanthropy, example, encouragement, active participation, or faith. No matter how we do this, our service will bless us and increase the experience of life in our midst. When we find ways in our everyday routines to bless the life around us and the life within us, we can repair the world.”

Just yesterday we buried Minnie Williams and as we celebrated her life, we acknowledged the many ways she increased life in our world and truly blessed us all with laughter, love, fun, acceptance and much care and concern. Even though Minnie was almost 91,

her body had given her as much life in this world that was humanly possible, and she was truly ready to die, I will never be ready for her to go as she was one of those rare individuals who always made you feel good about yourself and your life in her presence. When you were with Minnie you knew that she genuinely cared about you and the challenges and joys of your life. Whenever I visited Minnie these last 14 years, she always offered me a glass of wine, we laughed and talked about what we knew, we got caught up with all that was going on in our lives and in the lives of our loved ones and in her whimsical and fun-loving way, she sent me on my way in better space and spirits than I had come.

Whether she was teaching, playing poker, having cocktails with friends, loving, feeding and chastising her beloved Bryan J., nurturing and burying her sons, or being cared for so amazingly by her dear grandsons, Minnie's relationships and the fun-loving and caring way she interacted with others painted a meaningful and reflective picture of how the bonds of friendship, faith and family truly sustains the essence of our lives and the fiber of our beings. Minnie always found ways to bless the life around us and the life within us and in so doing God used her to repair our world and give us reason to go and do likewise.

I believe that Abram's covenant with God 4000 years ago and God's promise of land and descendants is not only Abram's call to experience abundant life but as heirs of God's promise it is also our call to experience abundant life in the here and now of our lives. Although most of us have not heard God's voice or slaughtered animals from head to toe to fulfill our part of the relationship, I think we can affirm that God calls us each to experience abundant life in the everyday circumstances and predicaments of our lives.

Whether or not we are a brain surgeon, a student, a millionaire, a pauper, a tailor, a teacher, a powerful leader, a powerless victim, or a 90 year-old woman confined to a bed, there is either more life in the world because of us or there is less life in the world because of us. I don't think what we choose to do with our lives matters as much to God as the choices we make each day to use our gifts, talents, time, energies and passions in ways that connect us more fully with life and allow us to bless, serve and increase the abundance of life in our midst.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving and Gracious God, we gather together on this morning hoping to experience a sense of your presence in our midst that will help us to feel less fragmented and more comfortable with the spiritual part of us that connects us more fully to ourselves, to each other and to you. O God, in the midst of our problems, busyness, distractions, work, and relationships, remind us that you are the One who continues to seek us and offer us perspective, promise, healing and hope beyond the narrow view of reality that is familiar and known to us. In our attempts to find you and hear you and discern your will for our lives, we forget that it is you who are seeking after us. Help us to wait with hope and to remain open to your endless and insane possibilities that come to us in the ordinary events of our lives from friends and strangers who usually unknowingly act as your messengers of grace and promise and comfort.

As we open our fragile selves and fragmented lives to your love and purposes, remind us that it is probably more important to do acts of love and kindness toward others than it is to try and live a pure and holy life that is really not much good to anybody. We pray O God, for the courage to live lives of love and peace and generosity that reflect our gratitude to you for the gift of life we have been given and for the love and care and connections we experience in the ups and downs of life.

Please be with our friends and loved ones who are especially upset by illness, depression, grief, tragedy, or uncertainty. Give them a sense of peace and presence that will enable them to weather the storms in their lives and come out on the other side more whole. Gather us all more fully into your love and purposes that our lives may reflect the love that has claimed us and continues to sustain us. Let us pray together...