

20/20 Hindsight

Sometimes it seems the hidden message of Lent is that we are supposed to be on a straight line to salvation.

No doubts, no sinning, no messing up.

That, of course, is sheer human ego talking, not the will of God.

And today's three lessons, two about Abraham and one about the first disciples, are intended to remind us about just that.

The actual journey of salvation looks a lot like the old Family Circus cartoon where young Billy has just arrived home with his hair askance, his shirt ripped, pants torn with mud everywhere.

"I told you to come straight home!" his mom yells at him.

"I did!" he protests, thinking back in the bubble over his head of that journey home, up the tree, into the park, petting the stray dog, over to his pal's house for a quick game of football, all followed by slipping in that mud puddle just down the street.

Such is the journey to salvation.

We have heard this morning two stories of Abraham.

Both seem to hold him up as a man who indeed walks straight into salvation, with no doubts, no fears, only trust.

After all, this is the guy willing to sacrifice his son simply because God told him to.

How do you wrap your head around that?

How does anyone relate to that kind of faith?

Except, what we have today is not the whole story about Abraham's journey of faith.

You see, today's lesson from Genesis leaves things out.

Leaves out some mighty important things, actually.

For example, when God first gets Abraham to leave home for a new land, wife Sarah is one hot woman.

Really hot.

So hot that as they travel through Egypt, Abraham is terrified he'll be killed by Pharaoh, so Pharaoh can take Sarah as his wife.

What does trusting, full of faith, paragon of virtue, Abraham do in the face of that fear?

Does he say: "Come what may, I'll die if need be!?"

Not a chance.

Instead, he leans over and whispers to his lovely wife: "If they ask, I'm your brother, not your husband."

Turns out they do ask, and Pharaoh, believing the lie, brings Sarah into his home as his wife.

God sends plagues, which Pharaoh correctly interprets as signs that Sarah is indeed Abraham's wife, and Pharaoh, the pagan, the unbelieving heathen, believes God, returns Sarah to Abraham, and scolds Abraham for the deception.

You'd think the father of Judaism, Christianity and Islam would have learned his lesson, but oh no.

Not long after, as Abraham and Sarah continue their journey, they walk through another king's kingdom, and once again, sexy Sarah catches a king's eye, and once again, Abraham leans over and says: "Okay sis, you know the drill!"

This time God sends a dream to the pagan king, who, like Pharaoh, believes God, returns Sarah to her husband Abraham, and scolds Abraham for the deception.

And that's not all.

If you check your reading for today, you'll notice we read Genesis 17:1-7; 15-16.

Missing from today's reading is verse 17, the verse right after God says of Sarah: "I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her, and she shall give rise to nations, and kings shall come from her."

The very next verse has Abraham falling on his face NOT out of joy or out of reverence or out of fear at the great power of God; the very next verse has Abraham falling on his face LAUGHING!!

I quote:

"Abraham fell flat on his face. And then he laughed, thinking, "Can a hundred-year-old man father a son? And can Sarah, at ninety years, have a baby?"

So here is our paragon of faith, laughing at the ridiculous picture that a 99-year-old woman is going to give BIRTH!

Paul, writes today about Abraham: "He did not weaken in faith..."
"No distrust made him waver...."

But Paul is not some dewy-eyed sentimentalist glossing over Abraham's well-known swerves on his journey of faith.

Instead, Paul sees that in the very midst of Abraham's messy, sidetracking, even sinful journey, Abraham keeps walking.

Yes, Abraham trusts God then takes back that trust; yes Abraham often takes two steps forward and one step back; but through it all, he keeps walking.

Today, we have 20/20 hindsight.

We know that everything turns out swimmingly for Abraham and Sarah: the promised son is born, and this elderly, once barren couple, indeed are the parents of billions of people and hundreds of nations.

Abraham and Sarah don't have the benefit of hindsight.

They, on their journey, like we on ours, can only trust, in the halting, half-disbelieving way we all trust.

That lack of 20/20 hindsight is what sometimes gets us laughing at old Peter.

There he is correctly recognizing Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, only to completely misunderstand who and what Messiah is.

Poor dumb Peter.

Poor short-sighted Peter.

Except perhaps we shouldn't be too quick to point fingers, we who are blessed with the vantage point so many years later with 20/20 hindsight.

Like Abraham, Peter keeps walking; even if he doesn't always, or even often, knows where he is going.

They are like the father of the boy beset with seizures.

He approaches Jesus and begs for a cure:

"Anything is possible for those who believe," Jesus tells him.

"I do believe?" cries the man from the very core of his being;

"Help thou my unbelief!"

Thank God for Abraham, thank God for Peter, thank God for the father of the stricken boy.

Their human frailty, their doubt, their disbelief, it is a lifeline for each of us as we too take our little Billy paths home.

Left alone, we, like Peter that day, think in terms of glory, which prefers accomplishment to suffering; which prefers praise to the cross; which prefers wisdom to folly, and thus, when all is said and done, prefers evil to good.

Glory confirms what people want in a god.

Trust in the cross contradicts everything that people imagine that God should be.

But Jesus, turning to the crowds, reminds them, reminds us, that life is found not in glory, but in the cross: in giving up in order to

receive, in denying self in order to find one's self; in dying in order to live.

No wonder Peter took him aside to scold.

Would I, would you, have done anything differently?

There is one more thing.

Because we have the benefit of 20/20 hindsight with the story of Abraham, with the glory of the resurrection of our Lord; when it comes time to put on our cloak of faith and actually apply that faith to our individual and collective lives, right here on Oahu; right now, on March 4, 2012; no matter our wanderings with little Billy through hill and dale, mud puddles and treetops, we can, in all of our uncertainty, in all of our doubts, in all of our fears, look back on those who came before, and trust that the God who is faithful to Abraham, to Sarah, to Jesus and Peter, is also faithful to you and to me.

And so if you find yourself wandering into places you ought not to be, keep walking.

If you do or say things you wish you hadn't, keep walking.

If you fall down, get up, and keep walking.

One day, God will gather us up and show us the meaning of every detour, every frolic, every pain and every joy in our lives.

On that day, with the gift of 20/20 hindsight, we will know as we have been known, and we will give thanks for all that our life has been.

+amen

