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The Parish Paper

OF
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Vol.38 No.16

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

03/18/07

READING GENESIS (V)

Two realities confront each other in the spiritual landscape of Genesis. One is the almighty and steadfast good will of the Creator, to preserve, sustain, and bless the good order of his creation. The other reality is that of man's willful rebellion, darkness of mind, and inflammation of appetite, a state of alienation from God, from his world, and even from ourselves, whereby man abandons the vocation and destiny to which he has been called, and sets himself at enmity with God and the order of creation.

God must oppose this willful rebellion, and bring it to an end; yet he must do so without frustrating his own purpose in creation. Therefore, in the face of man's rebellion God does not abandon the design and purpose of his work as Creator. As the story of the Flood shows us, there is indeed wrath and judgment on the rebellious heart of man, yet the same story of the Flood also shows us the will of God to preserve the creation and even man himself in the face of man's rebellion. In the story of the Tower of Babel (chapter 11) God confounds the designs of human pride, and the misuse of man's gifts (especially speech), yet he is content to disperse the human race throughout the earth. And it is from the ancient land of Babel (to be identified with Babylon) that God chooses and calls one man, Abraham, upon whom the blessing lost through sin will be renewed. In order that Abraham may become the father of a great nation, in whom all the nations of the earth shall be blessed (11.27-12.9), he is called to a great renunciation – to abandon his country, his kindred, and his father's house, to go to a land which God will show him. Obedient to the word of God, Abraham does so, and in the land of Canaan, God appears to him and promises the land to his "seed" (12.7). There he lives the life of a nomadic shepherd with his household, and his son and grandson after him. And indeed most of Genesis (12-50) has to do with the life of "strangers and pilgrims" in the land of promise, a life which they have embraced, in response to the blessing promised by God in his word (cf. to Abraham, 15; 17.1-8; 22.15-18; 24.7-8; to Isaac 26.1-5; to Jacob, 28.13-15; 32.24-32; 35.9-15).

Although it is only named explicitly once in Genesis, the core of Abraham's (and Isaac's and Jacob's) attitude and action is his faith (15.6), whereby he believes the word of God, embraces the promises of blessing in hope, renounces natural expectations, and sojourns in the land in obedience to the divine will. It is the word of God, received in faith, which shapes the great decisions of their lives. The stories of the patriarchs sometimes produce consternation in modern Christian

readers, but the strangeness of some of the narratives only throws into stronger relief the decisive fact of the divine promise, and the faith which believes the word, hopes, renounces, and obeys.

The first test of Abraham's faith is the absence of a son and heir, apparently in contradiction to the divine word and purpose. His wife Sarah is barren, and they are getting on in years. On this matter, Abraham's faith falters more than once, as he casts about for some worldly expedient to secure what God has apparently failed to deliver. God however, simply renews and clarifies the promise.

At one point in the narrative (chapter 15), Abraham cries out to the Lord in consternation, and proposes that he should adopt one of the household servants as his son and heir. God answers with an emphatic clarification, that his heir will be his own natural son. "And he brought him forth abroad, and said, look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, so shall thy seed be. And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness." And subsequently we are told, when all natural expectations and worldly expedients had been exhausted, and Abraham's faith purified through many a trial, that Isaac was born of Sarah (21.1-5).

In his reading of Genesis, Saint Paul shows us with profound insight how decisive this faith was, not only for Abraham, but for all those believe. Having surveyed the landscape of human sin, and the failure of man to be justified before God through works done in obedience to the law, Paul returns to Genesis 15.6: "Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness". "Against hope" he "believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations....And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah's womb: he staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform. And therefore", Paul quotes Genesis 15.6, 'it was imputed to him for righteousness". Paul concludes: "now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him; but for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification" (Romans 4..3, 6-25).

Abraham is a fallible sinner, like any human being. Yet God reckons him righteous, simply on account of his faith in the promises of God, faith which is implicitly faith in Jesus Christ, and in his resurrection from the dead. In that faith, there is a new beginning for Abraham and for the whole human race – a new beginning for life under the blessing of God. And so Abraham is truly "the father of a great nation" – not merely the Jews, but all those that believe. By faith we are connected as the children of Abraham, and heirs of the promised blessing.

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