

Enslaved To Whom?

Presbyterian Church of New Rochelle

June 29, 2014

“So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. (Gen. 12:4)

Last Sunday you may remember we considered part of Jesus' instructions to his disciples before sending them out into the world. Matthew quotes Jesus as saying “I came not to bring peace but a sword” and we said that was a hard saying. This morning our reading from Genesis tells a story that is arguably *the* most difficult in all of Scripture - save the crucifixion. While it does not end in tragedy it is in no way a happy ending. In the end we cannot avoid unflattering questions about the nature of our God.

Let us begin with a quick survey of just who this unique character Abraham really was. We first meet Abram, the name given by his father Tehra, not long after the flood. Tehra, descended of Shem, took his son Abram and Abram's wife Sarai and his grandson Lot and moved from Ur to Haran. That Sarai was barren was already known. It was in Haran that God said to Abram “Go from your country and your kindred in your father's house to the land that I will show you. 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.” (Genesis 12:2) Abram's response? Scripture simply says: “So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. (v. 4) And we think we live in a mobile society! That is rather extraordinary

don't you think? To have heard God's call and respond without questioning. No, “why me God?”; or “I hear you God but how am I to make a great nation if my wife is barren?” or “would you mind telling me just where we are going? I mean what is the job market there?; or “My career is just getting started just let me get vested”; or “Where? Sarai wants to know what the housing market and schools are like”. None of that. Scripture says simply: “So Abram went, as the Lord had told him”.

Right away, we know that Abraham is exceptional; not only does he hear God's voice he is obedient without question. So at age 75 Abram begins the next chapter in his life. Abram and Sarai and Lot lived a nomadic life seeking fields to graze the growing herds. They lived in Shechem, Negeb, Egypt, and Bethel. Over time Abram and Lot separated and Lot ended up with some pretty fertile farm land. But Abram also prospered and the numbers of livestock and herders increased. At one point Abram was forced into battle to secure the release of Lot from captivity. After the battle, Abram was blessed by Melchizedek, the priestly king, for his cunning and bravery. Night after night Abram looked at the stars in the heavens and wondered how he was to make the great nation God had promised. Abram was obedient,

resourceful, brave in battle and a good businessman. He stood tall in any gathering.

There was the maidservant Hagar who begat Ishmael and when Abram was 99 years old, God renewed his covenant and gave him the name Abraham meaning exalted ancestor; ancestor of the multitude. Likewise Sarai is given the name Sarah meaning Princess. God renewed his promise to give them a son who was to be named Isaac. So it appears that Isaac will inherit God's covenant from his father. As a sign of this renewed covenant every male in Abraham's household is to be circumcised of the flesh of their foreskins. Not long after, God confides in Abraham his plans for Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham negotiates vigorously with God on behalf of the righteous but as it turns out only Lot and his family survive. Finally, in his 100th year, Sarah, who had been barren, gave birth to a baby boy whom they named Isaac meaning laughter. That is quite a career! God has been faithful in his promise to Abraham; the promise of a multitude of nations will be fulfilled through his son Isaac.

But God does not seem to be satisfied with Abraham, the first of his chosen people. God demands additional evidence of Abraham's faithfulness commanding him to "take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you." (Genesis 22:1-2) How did Abraham respond this time? Surely not as before. Did he negotiate as he had on behalf of the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah – people he had never laid eyes on? Did he say "But God, is not Isaac the fulfillment of your

promise to make of me a multitude of nations? Are you sure this is what you want to do?" No; As Audrey read so beautifully moments ago, Abraham responded obediently: "So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and his son Isaac;" (v.3)

Blind obedience. Is there any other way to describe Abraham, son of Terah, father of Isaac? The word obedience has picked up a lot of baggage over the years. It is generally viewed as weak or subservient. It is definitely not alpha personality behavior. We do not associate obedience with the rugged American individualist that has become the model used in public conversation and around policy matters. Paul in his letter to the Romans connects obedience and slavery. Do we connect obedience to our own shameful addiction to slavery and the white supremacy that followed? Is that where all the negative connotations emanate from? Is there any truth in the observation that obedience in parent - child relationships has declined significantly? Do any of us relate to Paul's use of the word slavery to describe our relationship with God – or is it a complete turn off?

Is there any positive aspect to obedience in today's culture? Not to be trite but we spend a lot of time and money enrolling our dogs in obedience school – think of the Westminster dog competition. What about horses and their importance on the farm or in herding cattle; or more amazingly in the Olympic "dance" competition called dressage. We teach obedience to our most trusted and important animals and it vastly enhances the relationship. Is there a correlation to be made?

Today, we do not generally associate obedience with leadership – quite the opposite. But when soldiers are on the battlefield they are expected to obey; to be obedient to their commanding officer; and their commanding officer to the next link up in the chain of command. If a soldier breaks ranks or deserts in battle he is like to get killed by the enemy. If the enemy doesn't get him he may be found guilty of desertion and executed. Either way, failure to obey is often deadly. In this context, to obey conveys a sense of discipline which has much more positive overtones. Is it OK to be obedient in the Marine Corps. but not in one's job?

Discipline increases our productivity, helps avoid problems and guard against foolish errors. But note that obedience leaves no room for debate or questioning; one simply does what one is told. If obedience on the battle field is considered life-saving why do Christians often fail to understand obedience to their Creator in the same way? Did Abram understand something fundamental that we have lost in today's more privileged culture; what David Brooks this week called our moral recession?

We said that Abram, son of Tehra, was blindly obedient. He does not ask why or where. He doesn't try to fit God's demand into his own understanding of the present order; he doesn't negotiate for more convenient timing. He simply went as the Lord had told him. This theme of obedience is echoed repeatedly in the New Testament by Jesus and of course the Apostle Paul. As the Reformer Martin Luther (via Bonhoeffer) interprets Christ's teaching: "Things must happen not according to your own knowledge, but rather above your own knowledge; immerse yourself in

the abandonment of understanding, and I will give you my understanding. Abandonment of understanding is real understanding; not knowing where you are going is the right way to know where you are going. My knowing makes you completely unknowing. Thus did Abraham depart from his home without knowing whither. He surrendered himself to my knowledge and let go of his own knowledge, and travelled the right path to the right end. Behold, that is the way of the cross; you cannot find it, I must rather lead you like a blind person." (*Meditations on the Cross, Discipleship and the Cross*, D. Bonhoeffer, p. 18-19. attributed to M. Luther) Indeed, as we read two weeks ago, Jesus' last words were: "teach them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt. 28:20)

It may be that we cannot find the cross on our own – that our human instincts will almost always lead us astray. If that is true, we must be very careful to discern that what pushes us forward is God's will and not our own beliefs or desires. If the primary lesson this morning is obedience, surely the underlying subtext is *Thy* will be done.

So how are we to imagine the nature of our Creator, our God, who would ask a parent to sacrifice their only child? Do we hope that God understood metaphor and meant us to understand this episode more as parable than recorded history? Do we imagine that God demands from us only what we can give – that he would not have made the same request of me for I would have failed? Do we understand that God expects absolute obedience and until we learn to obey we

will not be considered righteous? Or could it be that in Abraham the bar was set too high and that God would in time need to make a further adjustment?

I came across Martin Luther's teaching of the story of Abraham and Isaac. Luther was himself the father of six children, including three sons. In this lesson he seems focused on the mind of Abraham. He muses on Abraham's behalf: If only I could think this over; if only I could share this with Sarah. He imagines the agony of the three-day journey to Moriah; the self-doubt; the questioning of why God would make this demand, how God would fulfill his promise of a make of him a multitude of nations. Would God prove unfaithful in the end? Luther writes:

"Then Abraham bound him and laid him upon the wood. The father raised the knife. The boy prepared his throat. If God had slept an instant, the lad would have been dead. I could not have watched. I am not able in my thoughts to follow. The lad was a sheep for the slaughter. Never in history was there such obedience save only in Christ. But God was watching, and all the Angels. The father raised his knife; the boy did not wince."

Luther brings the lesson to a close this way:

"See how divine majesty is at hand in the hour of death. We say, "In the midst of life we die." God answers, "Nay, in the midst of death we live."

But here's the punchline. We are told that

"Luther once read this story for family devotions. When he finished, his beloved

wife Katie said, "I do not believe it. God would not have treated his son like that."

"But, Katie", answered Luther, "he did."

Amen