

**11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**19<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**Sunday, August 08, 2010**

**FIRST READING: Genesis 15:1-6**

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” 2But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” 3And Abram said, “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” 4But the word of the LORD came to him, “This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.” 5He brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” 6And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

**SECOND READING: Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16**

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 2Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. 3By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

8By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. 9By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 11By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old - and Sarah herself was barren - because he considered him faithful who had promised. 12Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.”

13All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, 14for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. 15If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. 16But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

Ἔστιν δὲ πίστις ἐλπίζομένων ὑπόστασις, πραγμάτων ἔλεγχος οὐ βλεπόμενων. 2 ἐν ταύτῃ γὰρ ἐμαρτυρήθησαν οἱ πρεσβύτεροι.

3 Πίστει νοοῦμεν κατηρτίσθαι τοὺς αἰῶνας ῥήματι θεοῦ εἰς τὸ μὴ ἐκ φαινομένων τὸ βλεπόμενον γεγονέναι.

<sup>8</sup> Πίστει καλούμενος Ἀβραὰμ ὑπήκουσεν ἐξελθεῖν εἰς τόπον ὃν ἤμελλεν λαμβάνειν εἰς κληρονομίαν, καὶ ἐξῆλθεν μὴ ἐπιστάμενος ποῦ ἔρχεται. <sup>9</sup> Πίστει παρῶκησεν εἰς γῆν τῆς ἐπαγγελίας ὡς ἀλλοτρίαν ἐν σκηναῖς κατοικήσας μετὰ Ἰσαὰκ καὶ Ἰακώβ τῶν συκκληρονόμων τῆς ἐπαγγελίας τῆς αὐτῆς. <sup>10</sup> ἐξεδέχετο γὰρ τὴν τοὺς θεμελίους ἔχουσαν πόλιν ἧς τεχνίτης καὶ δημιουργὸς ὁ θεός. <sup>11</sup> Πίστει καὶ αὐτὴ Σάρρα δύναμιν εἰς καταβολὴν σπέρματος ἔλαβεν καὶ παρὰ καιρὸν ἡλικίας ἐπεὶ πιστὸν ἠγήσατο τὸν ἐπαγγελιάμενον. <sup>12</sup> διὸ καὶ ἀφ’ ἐνὸς ἐγεννήθησαν, καὶ ταῦτα νεκρωμένοι, καθὼς τὰ

ἄστρα τοῦ οὐρανοῦ τῷ πλήθει καὶ ὡς ἡ ἄμμος ἢ παρὰ τὸ χεῖλος τῆς θαλάσσης ἢ ἀναρίθμητος.

<sup>13</sup> Κατὰ πίστιν ἀπέθανον οὗτοι πάντες, μὴ κομισάμενοι τὰς ἐπαγγελίας ἀλλὰ πόρρωθεν αὐτὰς ἰδόντες καὶ ἀσπασάμενοι καὶ ὁμολογήσαντες ὅτι ξένοι καὶ παρεπίδημοι εἰσιν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς. <sup>14</sup> οἱ γὰρ τοιαῦτα λέγοντες ἐμφανίζουσιν ὅτι πατρίδα ἐπιζητοῦσιν. <sup>15</sup> καὶ εἰ μὲν ἐκείνης ἐμνημόνευον ἀφ' ἧς ἐξέβησαν, εἶχον ἄν καιρὸν ἀνακάμψαι. <sup>16</sup> νῦν δὲ κρείττονος ὀρέγονται τοῦτ' ἔστιν ἐπουρανίου. διὸ οὐκ ἐπαισχύνεται αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς θεὸς ἐπικαλεῖσθαι αὐτῶν· ἠτοίμασεν γὰρ αὐτοῖς πόλιν.

## *Starry Starry Night*

+ *In nomine Domini. Amen.*

Grace to you and peace in the name of God who calls each of us to a life of faith. **Amen.**

Can you imagine the conversation in the middle of the night? Not the conversation in the Story in Genesis where God and Abram (later to have a name change to Abraham) have a visionary meeting ... not that conversation; but the conversation that ensued as the elderly husband came back to bed inside the tent and touching the shoulder of his elderly wife ... woke her up.

“Whaaat?” asked Sarah, annoyed that her rest has been disturbed. “Where have you been?”

“I just had a dream.”

“That’s nice. Go back to sleep.”

“No really. It was an important dream.”

“I’m sure it was dear husband. Go back to sleep.”

“No really, it was Adonai (the Lord God) and myself, we were talking.”

“I’m sure you were,” Sarah was now more than a trifle irritated and rolled over on her side turning away from Abram. “I’m sure you had a nice chat,” she yawned.

“We went outside and looked at the stars ... I was awake ... we talked ... Adonai and I talked ... really ... and the stars ... we looked at them together!”

“That’s fine my wide-awake husband, did you both see Orion’s belt?”

“No, I mean it. We talked. We debated, argued a little bit. I told him we didn’t have any children.”

Sarah turned over and faced her husband, “I’m sure God knows that already, Abram. We have no children of our own. That’s true. Smart Adonai.”

“Don’t make fun. He told me that we were going to have as many descendants as the stars we were looking at.”

At this Sarah began to giggle.

“You shouldn’t laugh at God,” Abram declared.

“Why not. Will it make me pregnant?”

But that’s another part of the story where Sarah’s giggling inside their tent when three angelic visitors would come to visit not at midnight but at high noon telling Abram that his elderly wife was pregnant ... and the result of that giggling would of course result in the birth of Isaac (Yitzhak, *laughter*).

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The covenant with Abraham and Sarah is the foundation of faith; our roots, as followers of Jesus, are found in that Story.

Sometime after the death and resurrection of Jesus in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE, perhaps as early as the year 60, there appeared a Sermon. It used to be thought that maybe it was written by Paul, or one of his companions; but the author is never named in the writing and most biblical scholars acknowledge that the identity of the writer remains unknown.

This Sermon appears as the 19<sup>th</sup> book in the Greek Scriptures, the “New Testament,” it’s the *Letter to the Hebrews*.

The intended readers were a community that had been founded enthusiastically some years before, but now were in a slump, in a period of giving up once the persecution of followers of Jesus began to grow with intensity under the Roman Empire. Many dropped out or simply *drifted* away.

Sounds like the Church, doesn’t it? Folks join a congregation with great enthusiasm, and then when the work begins, when responsibility is called for, when things begin to become less than heavenly and more every-day-like ... people drift off, drop out, walk away.

I’ve had more than one person or family come to me at the end of the Midnight Mass at Christmas or the bright and glorious Eucharist of Easter and announce fervently that they were going to join *this* congregation and would call me next week about making it happen ... and then ... never appear again.

*Faith*, says the Sermon to this unknown community, is not the explosive emotional experience of the moment ... faith is the everyday plodding-along-trust that is so vital to human existence.

After our son died, I was having a conversation with someone whose son had also died, but many years before. “How did you do it?” I asked. “How did you make it from then until now?”

She said to me, “You pray a lot. You tough it out every day. You trust. You believe. It’s not easy, but that’s what you do.”

Sarah and Abraham, Moses and Miriam, Isaiah, Hosea, Amos, Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary, Jesus in the Garden, the women at the foot of the Cross, Martin Luther, St. Francis of Assisi, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr. ... the countless as many as the stars unnamed people in between ... you ... me ... dreaming, visioning, trusting ...

The 1<sup>st</sup> Century Sermon speaks again, I love the way it begins,

Ἦστίτιν δὲ πίστις ἐλπίζομένων ὑπόστασις, πραγμάτων ἔλεγχος οὐ βλεπτομένων.

Now faith is the assurance [ὑπόστασις ... *assurance*, but also *reality, substance*] of things hoped for, the conviction [ἔλεγχος ... *conviction*, but more *proof*] of things not seen.

Let's try that again,

“Now,” begins the Sermon. I love that. It is the *now* in the moment of those early ancestors of ours, facing persecution, wanting to run away, hide, cover their heads with blankets of avoidance ... it is the *now* in my life, in your life, in this moment, in the moment when we ask “Should I keep going about all this? Is any of it working? Does anyone care?” ... in that *now* the Sermon begins,

“Now ... faith is the reality, the substance of things hoped for, the proof of things we cannot see.”

That's it. It's enough to make one dream, perhaps have visions, maybe even go outside and look at the stars at Midnight. Perhaps even dare to picture a little Lutheran congregation in the City of Holy Faith filled and overflowing with ... children!? That's enough to make one giggle, maybe even laugh ... ☺

There's a wonderful prayer by Thomas Merton (of blessed memory), that speaks to all of this dreaming, hoping, trusting, reality of things hoped for, proof of things we cannot see ... It's written in the first person singular, but it works when we place it into the plural.

Let us pray.

“Our Lord God, we have no idea where we are going. We do not see the road ahead of us. We cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do we really know ourselves, and the fact that we think that we are following your will does not mean that we are actually doing so. But we believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And we hope that we have that desire in all that we are doing. We hope that we] will never do anything apart from that desire. And we know that if we do this, you will lead us by the right road though we may know nothing about it. Therefore will we trust you always though we may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. We will not fear, for you are ever with us, and you will never leave us to face our perils alone.”<sup>1</sup>  
**Amen.**

*Deo Gratias (+)  
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<sup>1</sup> (Thoughts in Solitude).