

“Not a Pep Talk” (28Feb21)

Romans 4:13-25; Genesis 17:1-7,15-16; Mark 8:31-38

Sometimes a caricature is insightful; other times the incomplete picture is perhaps misleading.

Maybe you'd caricature my big ol' nose. Or maybe a frosty beard from winter biking. I don't know what single characteristic you might pick out, but to know me by that one trait would leave something out.

Paul writes of the characteristic of Abraham's faith. Paul, of course, means well. But he maybe overstated his case, caricaturing it.

BYOB Bible Study discussed Paul's line that nothing made Abraham “waver concerning the promise of God,” and no external evidence could make him “weaken in faith.” Whether or not such dedication is emblematic of Abraham, when it's overblown, it can be misleading.

Paul promotes it so highly to offer encouragement. Similarly, the statements from Jesus about dying and living were like what military leaders would give before a difficult battle to bolster scared soldiers.* I suppose our models are halftime locker room pep talks, for a boost of energizing. Paul is trying to invigorate the troops with his bold descriptions of faith.

Now, if a model of strong faith as unwavering devotion is helpful for you, you can take that.

On the other hand, if you need some assurance that you're not the only one who does waver, then you certainly have that example and guarantee when we move beyond the quick caricature of Abraham as eminently faithful.

Instead of thinking of him as so strong, we might call him Waverham. The guy wavered constantly. He had promises from God. He had signs like the stars in the sky and sand of the beach to go with the promise. He had marks of the covenant. He had dreams and discussions with God. He got out of tight situations, partly as a sign of God's favor. Still it wasn't enough.

We buy into Abraham waiting for a son as the only way God's promises could move forward. But Abraham already had a son. He and his wife Sarah were scheming on how they could make God's promises happen, so Abraham slept with Sarah's slave. Ishmael was Abraham's son with Hagar. This offspring of a slave and master received big promises from God on his own. Hagar herself, though victimized, traumatized, and oppressed, still argued with God almost as an equal. So the story isn't quite so simple as Paul puts it, that Abraham believed and trusted God and everything turned out just peachy.

What's more, Abraham himself can at times come across as almost irrelevant. Paul says that his 100-year-old body was “already as good as dead,” and we might wonder how sharp his mind was, either. For being called a patriarch, including of three religions who trace ancestry back to him, he almost is a prop. Sarah shuffles him around and tells him what to do. He has tricks played on him, and is foolish in return. In the verse after our reading today, where God yet again promises a son, Abraham laughs at God. Maybe it's that not very much of his faith matters, and his mind doesn't matter, and only one part of his body matters for having a son.

It actually seems Sarah is the one who matters. Again, Abraham already had offspring, but Sarah didn't. The reading declares God will bless her, “and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”

Interestingly, in the next chapter this is retold, but instead of just reporting dialogue from God, it's a story, given a setting and a plot. Three visitors come as Abraham is sitting in the shade of the Hebron oaks. Abraham offers them a big meal (which, of course, Sarah and a servant had to prepare). And then the visitors say that Abraham and Sarah will have a child, and from the other side of the tent flap where she has been eavesdropping, Sarah laughs. The visitors say, “Why did Sarah laugh that she'll have a son” (as if it weren't obvious, what with her being 90 years old and

* Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, p246

postmenopausal), but Sarah still feels a need to retort, “No no no, I didn’t laugh!” And they say, “Ohhhh yes, you laughed!” Kind of a back and forth “Did not.” “Did so.”

The end result is that the child will be named Laughter. Isaac.

An opposite of unwavering faith, their son has a mnemonic moniker that will reiterate every time they say it that when God made a promise, their response was to doubt. To chuckle. Far from a firm “Amen, it shall be so, let it be with me according to your word.” Old Abe, the father of faith, is the parent of Laughs-at-God.

Which may assuage your sense of your own faith, of doubt and uncertainty, of feeling weak or like a loser or just not getting it. And if I prompted a notion of your biblical camaraderie, I admit I regularly fail at pep talks, encouraging you to buck up and be confident and give it a go.

But let’s remember that it’s not really about you. It’s about God, and how you’re invited into God’s story. God was making this covenant with Abraham, not waiting for Abraham to sign on a dotted line, much less for it to be validated by the generations to come. God simply made the promise, long before Isaac or any of the others were even born.

This is, we’re told, the God “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.” Abraham was as good as dead, mostly dead, but Jesus was all dead. Yet in his death and resurrection we see not an ending but our new beginning, calling faithful possibility into you where it didn’t exist.

It may seem strange I’m excusing your lack of valor, your weakling efforts, your failures at faith, while Paul tries to commend the righteousness of faith over distrust, and when Jesus himself tells you to take up your cross and follow him. I know those words can weigh heavily, as you’re trying to live faithfully in the way Jesus wants you to, to be a good disciple, to dedicate yourself to following him. You may wonder what is your cross to bear and whether you’re suffering enough for his sake.

But I want to pause and flip that around, to say that it’s not about trying to convince you to do

more for Jesus. He invites you to set aside the repercussions, and to live with that grace, that openness of faith. It’s not at all for how you need to prove yourself to Jesus, but exactly how you *don’t* need to give in to society’s standards.

See, crucifixion was the worst threat that the powers of Jesus’ time could inflict. It was public shaming, deep humiliation, and finally death showing you lost and the empire won. But Jesus says you don’t need to think of that as losing, don’t need to avoid humiliation, don’t have to measure your loss, don’t have to succumb to being threatened into isolated fear.

It’s just this sort of possibility from God that frees you to live in grace. Abraham didn’t need to claim his faith was tip-top firm; he could identify himself as feeble old Waverham. Sarah didn’t need to deny her laughter, but could say You’ll never believe it: I’m the mother of Laughs-at-God. Peter, the rock, not because of his firm foundation of faith but because he was a stumbling block-head, even with his downright denials nevertheless could come to proclaim resurrection and the expansive blessings of God.

So even if you’re a wavering weakling doubter who scoffs more than you trust God and can’t muster a good work with all the efforts of your flesh and can’t prove anything and mess up more than you get it right, hey! No problem. Check out your ancestors in the faith. Even more than that, look to your God, the one “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.”