

FROM DEATH TO LIFE: From Survival to Trust

Second Sunday of Lent

March 4, 2012

Jill R. Russell

Texts: Genesis 17.1-7, 15-16;
 Psalm 22.23-31;
 Romans 4.13-25;
 Mark 8.31-39

Last week Gordon began his sermon asking us a series of questions. One of them was to envision what we most fear about God. I think he was quite right in asserting that the most common fear people have about God is that they will be punished. At least for those of us raised in the western world who have been influenced by the way Christianity has developed in our culture. "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" is the title of a sermon preached by Jonathan Edwards in 1741. That title probably captures well the culture of fear Gordon was referring to last week.

My hope though is that people who have truly invested themselves in a life of faith – especially in a community of faith – have come to hear as much about God's love as they have been warned about God's wrath. When I think about how I was formed in faith I suspect a slightly different fear comes up more readily for me than a fear of punishment. The passage we have read from the gospel today pretty well captures it: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." If I were to name a fear I have wrestled with in my relationship with God it would be that God might demand more from me than I can give (or perhaps more honestly, more than I *want* to give).

If you were raised here in western Michigan and influenced at all by Dutch piety then I suspect you know what I am talking about. Yet it isn't unique to that particular form of Christian devotion. I've talked with east coast Catholics, and southern Baptists and Evangelicals from the west coast who have also been formed in the same vein. In this piety of self-sacrifice and martyrdom the mantra is, "give until it hurts and then give some more." That's the faith formation that then stands alongside our American culture of individualism, capitalism, and consumerism whose mantra is very different.

“Take as much as you can and then take some more because if you don’t stand up for yourself no one else will.”

You can see how these two strands of formation can kick up a fair bit of fear. If it’s true that we need to look out for ourselves because no one else will, then it makes absolutely no common sense to give until it hurts and give some more. Not if you want to survive. Survival is dependent on self-protection. And there is something very real about that claim. I am busy right now helping my almost four year old daughter learn how to keep herself safe: look both ways before crossing the street, wash your hands before you eat, keep electricity away from water. As parents we are constantly schooling our children in the art of self-protection. Their survival depends on it.

Then we hear Jesus say today, “For those who want to save their life will lose it...” Gordon invited us last week to shift our focus from our fears about God’s punishment to listen instead for the promises of God. After the destruction of the flood a covenant is made with all creation to uphold and sustain life and not to destroy it.¹ We come to a second covenant in our Old Testament reading from today: a promise to make of Abraham and Sarah a multitude of nations. It’s a promise of progeny. In a sense it is a promise of survival that their life and love will not end without an heir to carry that life and love forward. I think all of us (whether we have or want children or not) long in some way to have our life matter beyond this present moment; to know that some part of us is being carried forward and will survive beyond the length of our days.

The heart of the promise, though, is not in the assurance that Abraham and Sarah will have a child together. The heart of the promise is in verse 7: “I will establish my covenant between me and you...for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you, and to your offspring after you...” That’s a profound promise: “I will be God for you...I am FOR you.” We are *not* on our own in this life and that makes all the difference in the world. When we come to understand this promise deep in our bones it supersedes that anxious grasping for our own survival.

Now Abraham and Sarah lost track of this covenant along the way. The first promise of a child came some twenty five years before this passage for today.

¹ See Genesis 9.9-11

In those intervening years, common sense told them to find an alternative plan. At this point in the story Ishmael is already born. Remember the story of Hagar, Sarah's servant, who has a child with Abraham, whom they name Ishmael?² Here in chapter 17, God invites Abraham and Sarah to set aside all their fear for survival and trust that God will be God for them. Incidentally, when they acted out fear and listened to the wisdom of the world coaching them to take matters into their own hands – to do what they can to protect their survival because if they don't no one else will – they unleashed a world of chaos. What seemed like a good survival plan takes a nasty turn as a rivalry between Sarah and Hagar arises.³ The rivalry continues even after Sarah gives birth to Isaac.⁴ In fact this rivalry has carried forward to this present day as Islam and Judaism both trace their roots back to Abraham through these two heirs. And in the center of it all is this covenant promise: "I will be God to you and to your offspring after you."

When you understand that promise deep in your bones that God is for you and you are not alone, then anxiety for your own survival is not the driving force of your life. Sure, you'll still teach your children to be careful crossing the street. But you will also recognize the echoes of wisdom in this teaching of Jesus today. It's a counterintuitive wisdom. It probably sounds like sheer foolishness to those who concern themselves first and foremost with their own survival. "For those who want to save their life will lose it." Where's the wisdom in that?

As I said, the only alternative I ever encountered growing up was people who saw this passage as part of their piety of self-denial. I suspect you know the kind of spiritual devotion I mean. They are the kind of people who insist that anything they need is unimportant. They tend to define all forms of self-care as inherently selfish. They are your basic doormat who spiritualizes their suffering through the language of "taking up their cross" - a kind of martyr-complex that frankly borders on self-hatred. I know that sounds harsh but I do think this is what you find when you begin to unravel this way of thinking.

So what if we hear this passage in Mark 8 through the covenant promise in Genesis 17? If you begin with the promise that God is for us than you realize

² See this story in Genesis 16

³ See Genesis 16.5

⁴ See Genesis 21.8-11

there is no call to be a doormat. God intends that we flourish in life. Our needs *do* matter. Now that isn't license for self-absorption. When you recognize that we belong to God and are not alone, then you don't have to be anxious about protecting yourself either. We can follow Jesus wherever it may lead. We can stand for truth. We can give of ourselves. We can offer love. And even if that brought us to the point of death we don't need to be afraid. As Paul reminds us in Romans 8, there is nothing in life or in death that can separate us from the love of God. So we don't need to be afraid. When death is not the worst thing that could happen in your life – when you get clear about that – then you can be free. Truly free. That's the wisdom in Jesus' teaching: "those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

The Lenten Devotional on February 25th spoke of this wisdom. Earl Laman was reflecting on the temptation of Jesus which was in many ways a temptation to prioritize his own survival over the call of God to share the gospel. In his reflection, Earl writes that life emanates from acts of "love, giving and caring, seeking wisdom and truth, implementing justice and peace, initiating healthfulness and wholeness, reverencing life and creation, offering grace and acceptance, respecting others and wanting good for them."⁵ This is the realm of God that Jesus reveals. When we live in this way – we are truly alive! There are costs involved in living this way. But the benefits far outweigh the costs. Following after the way of Jesus gives incredible freedom. It allows us to be bold and courageous.

I remember listening to James Allison, Jesuit priest and theologian, who has advocated in the Roman Catholic Church for the same kind of inclusive and welcoming spirit that Hope Church has longed for in the RCA. I remember listening to him speak in the Commons two years ago now. He is brilliant as a theologian and bold in his witness for justice and at the same time is so gentle in his spirit and not at all anxious in his demeanor. Someone listening to him in the crowd that night asked how he could stand to stay within a church that does not respect or welcome who he is. And his response has stayed with me: "I've been baptized. I have already died with Christ. What more can they do to me?" I am sure there have been costs along the way; plenty of times when he has felt alienated and heartbroken in the church that he calls home. But he

⁵ From the Devotional Book: *Meditation for Lent from People of Hope February 22 - April 8, 2012* self published at Hope Church, pg 8.

learned of God's love in that church. He learned how to love in that church and he is not going to let go.

What really is the alternative? C.S. Lewis wrote in his book *The Four Loves*: "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it safe in the casket of your selfishness. But in that casket – safe, dark, motionless, airless – it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.⁶ "

"For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

This is the (very wise) Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God!

⁶ From C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, (San Diego, CA: A Harvest Book, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1960, 1988).