

Sermon for Lent 2B February 28 2021

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Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Psalms 22:22-30

Romans 4:13-25

Mark 8:31-38

In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen

Some years ago, a six-year-old Scottish girl named Lulu wrote a letter to God: It was titled "To God, How did you get invented?" Lulu's father, who is not a believer, sent her letter to the British press and various church leaders: the Scottish Episcopal Church (no reply), the Presbyterians (no reply), and the Scottish Catholics (who sent a theologically complex reply). He also sent it to the ABC, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, who sent the following letter in reply:

"Dear Lulu, Your dad has sent on your letter and asked if I have any answers. It's a difficult one! But I think God might reply a bit like this –

'Dear Lulu – Nobody invented me – but lots of people discovered me and were quite surprised. They discovered me when they looked round at the world and thought it was really beautiful or really mysterious and wondered where it came from. They discovered me when they were very very quiet on their own and felt a sort of peace and love they hadn't expected. Then they invented ideas about me – some of them sensible and some of them not very sensible. From time to time I sent them some hints – specially in the life of Jesus – to help them get closer to what I'm really like. But there was nothing and nobody around before me to invent me. Rather like somebody who writes a story in a book, I started making up the story of the world and eventually invented human beings like you who could ask me awkward questions!'

And then, Lulu, he'd send you lots of love and sign off. I know he doesn't usually write letters, so I have to do the best I can on his behalf. Lots of love from me, too. +Archbishop Rowan"

Faith itself seems to be a response to what we have learned, what has been revealed, what we have experienced of God, especially, as Rowan Williams says, through Jesus. "They discovered me when they were very, very quiet on their own and felt a sort of peace and love they hadn't expected...I sent them some hints, especially in the life of Jesus, to help them get closer to me."

Faith is closely aligned with trust, but here we must first begin to discriminate between just what is trustworthy and what might not be. In our daily world, we may have faith in, may trust, all manner of things: We might trust Wayne the weatherman in his predictions, or not. We might have faith in the Syracuse basketball team, or in the accuracy of the TV guide. We might have faith in the bus schedule, or computer models, or the Federal Reserve, or the government, God help us! We might have faith in our partners, or in ourselves, that we will not disappoint them or let ourselves down. We might even stand in front of the mirror each morning and encourage ourselves that we are capable of great things. But, truly, these are different than having faith in God.

The nature of God, as we perceive it, is different than those worldly resources on which we often rely. And the difference has to do with something Rowan Williams expressed in his letter to Lulu: We discover God when we feel a sort of love and peace we hadn't expected. Those worldly things from which we hope to feel constancy and trustworthiness typically disappoint us, while God, immortal and invisible, often the last resort for the discouraged, becomes paradoxically the most reliable.

Our God is a covenant God. Our intent, our response, is our participation in the great covenant God makes with us. It is a relationship. Faith is a relationship. But, of course, it is a relationship like no other; we credit God with making us in the divine image, so that by our birthright we have the same sensibilities as the divine: we hope for reconciliation, for justice, for glory. By faith, we sense the truth of these precepts of God, and accept them as the foundation of our life in Christ. Christian theology presumes a gracious and generous Divinity, who first loves us that we may come to know how to love God

and each other. God makes us, God loves us, and God keeps us. Nothing, not even our own sin, will separate us from God, for if we sin we have an advocate with the father, namely Jesus Christ the righteous.

The obedience which faith requires is less about mind-numbed compliance to the rules, and more about being true to the image of God which we all bear. It is found within our desire to be with God, to be like God, sharing the same values and mission. Obedience is found in our joy in building up God's Kingdom. In Genesis chapter 17, we find God speaking to Abraham, making him a promise, trying to convince old Abe to agree, in faith, to being in covenant. This is not the first time God has come to Abraham with this promise of special treatment. First in chapter 12 and then again in chapter 15, God says that Abe's descendants will be a great nation and number as the grains of sand on the beach and the stars in the clear night sky. These descendants will be empowered by their relationship with God to be a powerful force in a region of even more powerful empires; they will endure to set an example of faith to the others, and will bring them to God. Now, in chapter seventeen, God explains that that will happen because Abe's wife, Sarah, will have a son, despite her advanced age and apparent barrenness. God apparently really, really wants to do this! God has asked repeatedly, and his only requirement, if you think about it, is for Abe to have faith. That is, to say yes, to accept the covenant.

Paul, in a little Bible study in the letter to the Romans, describes it this way: the promise given to Abraham rests in grace, that is, on God's love which is an undeserved gift, something so valuable that it can't be earned or bought. However, the gift can be either refused or accepted. If Abe accepts this gift of a relationship with God, this covenant which God is offering, then this path of blessings, of becoming the father of a people which will inherit the earth, will become available to him. It's not a reward, and he could still mess it up, but God will be on, and at, his side. All Abe needs is faith, and Paul says that he had become fully convinced that God was able to do what had been promised. Paul goes on to say that we are in similar situation; if we can have faith so as to be convinced of the promise of new life as demonstrated by Jesus' resurrection, if by that faith we are willing to say yes and receive the gift, it makes God's gracious promise possible.

During my time as a chaplaincy intern in Rochester, I was frequently called to hospital units, often late at night, by nurses who were concerned about the despondency of patients. And I often heard the anguish of those who could no longer seem to find God. 'I have prayed and prayed to Jesus but he's just not there,' some would tell me, 'I have lost my faith, and I feel so empty inside.' 'I have done terrible things in my life, and God has turned his back on me.' 'Chaplain, why has God abandoned me now when I'm so scared?' Such encounters are truly heartbreaking, because they do, in fact, testify to a broken relationship, but it is our Christian belief that God will keep faith, will not give up on us, will endure all manner of sacrifice in order to renew and refresh our covenant relationship. On those late hospital nights, when I asked those patients if they would like me to pray with them, they often agreed to give God an opening, and were surprised to discover that God *was* in the room, that God is *always* faithfully in the room.

Of course, the topic of having faith runs through all religious discourse, but it has special importance during Lent. As we observe this season, by self-examination and confession, our progress towards new life will rest on God's promise of forgiveness, on that gift of undeserved love, that grace which is neither reward nor payment. Our progress will depend on our faith that God can deliver on the promise. When, at the beginning of the Sunday service in Lent, we say the salutation "bless the Lord who forgives all our sins...his mercy endures forever", do we have faith that that is true? If our answer is yes, then it opens our door to God's persistent knocking, and makes a new covenant, a new relationship, a new Easter life all the more possible. Amen.