



“Before the Gameplan”

Genesis 15:1-6, Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Al Bunis

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The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Today’s Lectionary texts are classics. They are both about faith...both providing perspective on what it means to lead a life of faith.

But the funny thing is that modern society doesn’t think of faith in the same way ancient society did.

One of the most indispensable books I’ve read as part of my seminary education is called *Biblical Social Values*. It’s by Bruce Malina...and the book speaks to how the peoples of Biblical times understood various core social values...values such as trust, love, envy, hospitality...and, apropos for today’s Scripture...faith.

Malina points out how the ancient take on faith was different from the way we think about it today. Today, we emphasize the intellectual aspect of faith. We see faith as believing in something...an idea...we see faith as an act of the mind...a rational act.

But in Biblical times, faith was seen as being more emotionally driven ...as being based on interpersonal relationships. Faith was a kind of personal loyalty...personal trust. Like many of the core social values from the time, faith was more heart-centered...as compared to the more mind-centered way we think about it today.

Both of our texts this morning...from Genesis and Hebrews...are about one of the defining Biblical relationships of faith...the relationship between Abraham and God.

By any measure, I think we can say that Abraham’s faith was remarkable. His faith gave him the courage to move his family...lock, stock and barrel...to a far-away and unknown land...undoubtedly a risky adventure...especially in a world when even the most routine events were dangerous.

But God had promised Abraham some pretty big stuff. God had promised a new land and descendants through whom the rest of the world would be blessed. I think we can agree that this is about as big as it gets.

To set the stage for our reading from Genesis, by the time we get to our text, a lot has already happened to Abraham...he is well into his journey. And while he has already initiated his leap of faith by starting his travels...it is still far from clear that he really trusts God’s promise.

Our text opens with an odd exchange between God and Abraham...one that is surprising to those of us who tend to idealize Abraham as the model of unquestioned faith and obedience.

After Abraham has won a series of battles, our text begins with God reassuringly saying, “Do not be afraid Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.”

Abraham responds in a skeptical manner. He responds by questioning God. He says, “what will you give me, for I continue to be childless...”

Abraham is essentially saying to God...you promised me heirs...so where are they?

I guess Abraham was still skeptical whether this “descendents” thing might actually work out. And who could blame him? His wife wasn’t getting any younger. I guess he wanted a little evidence to hang his hat on. He seems to be complaining...even challenging or prodding God to live up to God’s end of the bargain. Abraham actually seems annoyed.

In fact, this feels like hubris to me. Having just won a series of battles, maybe Abraham’s confidence was up...and so his ego came out...maybe Abraham was feeling that he might not need God’s protection as much as he thought. And so he reacts in a blunt and disrespectful manner when God tells him to not be afraid. Afraid of what? No...just do what you promised.

But God doesn’t rise to the bait...God simply responds by patiently reiterating the promise of numerous descendents. No further evidence...no down payment on the promise...just more of the same...the same old promise.

And so how does Abraham respond this time? He does a complete 180. The text simply says that Abraham “believed the Lord.” Without any further evidence...without any new information...Abraham chose to accept what God was saying at face value.

It’s as if Abraham somehow just knew. As illogical as it seemed, he just knew that he was supposed to accept this. In fact, logic doesn’t seem to enter into the equation. This is not a rational decision...it is an emotional decision...a decision of loyalty to God...a decision to let go of his ego...let go of his hubris.

And, it’s a decision that seals their relationship...and in the process, sets the standard for faith for generations to come. This decision to let go of his ego and re-commit to his relationship with God...this process of letting go, I think we can say that it is fundamental to faith.

Often we can learn a lot from Scripture...by what it doesn’t say. While at first it may seem curious that the text tells us so little about what was going on in Abraham’s head...there is essentially no explanation for Abraham’s change of heart. But this lack of explanation seems to say something about the nature of faith.

Maybe the lack of explanation is Scripture’s way of acknowledging that this kind of faith really isn’t so explainable...that maybe...similar to what Bruce Malina tells us in his book...faith is based on emotion...on loyalty...on trust. Logic, while undoubtedly part of faith, can’t be the sole driver. **At a certain point, if we are to truly let go, we have to just simply trust with our heart.**

It really does defy logic. Letting go when there is so little certainty...when there is no gameplan in sight. It’s only human to want to gain a measure of control over our lives...we all want a gameplan to reassure us.

And yet Genesis seems to be reminding us that faith, almost by definition, begins without evidence...without a gameplan...**that faith is not a gameplan...but instead it’s conviction before the gameplan unfolds.**

Our reading from Hebrews amplifies this point. The text says. “By 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.” Not knowing where he was going! No real

gameplan...faith first...then maybe the gameplan will unfold later. And as we know, it all did come to pass.

Along those same lines, this text from Hebrews includes a simple definition of faith. It is a statement that I love...a statement that is, in fact, definitional for my take on faith...so definitional that I used it in the first sermon I ever gave...a sermon on faith that I delivered here at Plymouth in June of 2002.

Hebrews 11:1 says the following: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

One of the aspects I love about this verse is that it presents an open-minded vision of faith. It presents faith as being integrally tied to our hopes...and our hopes are, of course, central to who we are as individuals. In this way, I think the verse allows room for difference in the way we think about our faith.

But what I also love about this verse is the fact that it realistically presents faith as somewhat of a leap. It realistically reminds us that gameplans and evidence are not what faith is about. It doesn't say gameplans aren't important...of course they are important...but this Scripture reinforces the idea that **we want to be open to the life of faith before the gameplan is ready.**

This is certainly how things have worked in my life.

When I began to look at this week's Lectionary readings, this verse from Hebrews jumped off the page to me. It kind of screamed that I had to preach on this text today.

Here I am, having just made some pretty big changes in my life...changes that are part of a religious reawakening that began about a dozen years ago...a renewal of my faith that began long before any gameplan was clear.

Kate Sekules called this week to interview me for an article she was writing for the Plymouth Newsletter. One of the questions she asked was how it felt when I first preached. In a word: terrified.

I had never done anything like this before. I was a true rookie. I had completed only a single course at seminary.

Plymouth was between pastors...which I guess is the reason I was given the chance to preach.

After signing on to preach, I began to ponder the many questions rookie preachers have to confront. Practical stuff....questions like: What should I preach on? How biographical should the sermon be? What if I offend someone? How long should it be? And the always important question...how should I sit when I'm not in the pulpit?

It turned out that the writing was the relatively easy part...I found that I enjoyed composing the sermon. But my more pressing questions were about delivery. Questions like: How should I stand? What to do with my hands?

And others....like, am I supposed to memorize? Or do I extemporize? Or do I read it?

Well, I took the safe way out...I chose to read it...word for word. And I think it's safe to say that it wasn't the smoothest of deliveries. As to that question about what to do with my hands? That answer was simple: so as not to lose my place, I held on to those pages for dear life.

The good news is that I got through this first sermon without a coronary. But the funny thing is that it was after this sermon that it first occurred to me that I might actually want to be a minister.

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What truly surprised me was that I enjoyed giving the sermon...even if I was only reading it...I got lost in the moment. I found the whole process...despite the stresses...to be fulfilling. And this opened my eyes to the possibility that I just might want to be a minister.

You see, I had entered seminary not really knowing what I wanted to do with the degree. I didn't even know what type of degree I wanted to get.

I just knew...somehow...that I simply had to be there. I literally felt compelled...drawn to satisfy my quest for deeper understanding of my relationship with God. I felt an unquenchable need to explore my faith. Beyond that, I hadn't the foggiest idea where I was headed.

I guess you could say that I didn't have a gameplan. My faith had led me to seminary...and from there...the gameplan was unclear.

Up until my faith re-awakening took root, I had spent an entire career on Wall Street, pursuing a dream that never really was a dream for me. I was never really all that excited about finance other than the financial security that this career could provide.

Sadly, I had decided, early on in my career, to put my relationship with God on the backburner. This was a conscious decision that was driven by the unfortunate view that I needed to be more independent...a belief that it was a show of weakness to lean hard on my faith...as I had as a youth. I guess in a way, what I decided was that I needed more hubris to succeed in the cold hard world.

But gradually over time, propelled by the sense that I was lacking a calling...as well as some pretty unsatisfying times in my career...I began to come back to my faith.

And thankfully, it eventually hit me that I needed to let go of this hubris to put my life back into God's empowering and forgiving hands. And this epiphany made all the difference in my life. The irony is that by admitting that I needed God...accepting that it was OK to lean hard on my faith in God...my confidence and happiness blossomed.

And what a life-fulfilling move this was. And I can tell you all here this morning...I am so thankful to God...not only for recapturing my faith...but also for Plymouth Church. You see, it was Plymouth that helped open me back up to my relationship with God.

It is no coincidence that my faith renewal began when we started coming to Plymouth. Like many, Lynn and I came because of our kids. But we stayed for much more than that...and there hasn't been a single moment since when I haven't been grateful for what began here at Plymouth.

You helped re-invigorate my relationship with God through Jesus Christ...and that's a statement I couldn't have made a dozen years ago.

You've seen me grow and change...as a person and as a man of faith. And you have accepted me at all points along the path...long before I knew what I was doing...long before I knew where I was heading...long before I had a gameplan. For this I am most blessed and most thankful.

The beauty of the life of faith is that God is patient. God didn't rise to the bait of Abraham's very human ego...God simply hung in there with Abraham...allowing him to grow into his new life of faith.

And here at Plymouth Church...it seems that we follow this example that God sets for us...we accept each other and we give each other room to grow and change...room to grow into our lives of faith.

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What more could your new Assistant Minister ask for.

Amen.

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Go now with God
Be not tempted to stay in the safety of known places
Be not tempted to go only in your own time
Chose to go with God
Elect not to go alone

Go in the faith that there is no valley so low
No wilderness so vast
No passage so crooked
That God is not already there waiting to be with you

Amen.