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Our Saviour/St. Stephen  
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Lent 2

Sisters and brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

So, sisters and brothers in Christ, the apostle Paul may have missed something in his understanding of Abraham in the Old Testament.

Paul may have overlooked an important detail in the story of our patriarch Abraham.

The apostle Paul talks all about Abraham in his letter to the Romans, from which we read this morning.

In particular, the apostle Paul talks all about the “faith” of Abraham.

Paul says, “Abraham BELIEVED that he would become the ‘father of many nations.’”

Paul says, “Abraham did not weaken in FAITH.”

And Paul says yet again, “No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in FAITH.”

And once more, Paul says, “Therefore, Abraham’s FAITH ‘was reckoned to him as righteousness.’”

So what did Paul miss? What did Paul overlook?

Only this, that Abraham did not question God, did not challenge God, did not struggle with God.

Abraham simply believed.

Now, you are probably wondering what do I mean?

PAUSE

If we were to go back to the opening verses of Genesis 12 to that initial call from God to Abraham.

If we go back to Genesis 12, we read there that the Lord said to Abraham, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great...”

And what does the text then say, “So Abraham went, as the Lord had told him.”

Abraham simply believed and obeyed. He didn’t question. He didn’t challenge. He did not struggle with God.

And so, we often hail Abraham as this great pillar of faith.

But notice others who have been called by God.

Moses, for instance...

Moses had all sorts of questions when God approached him at the burning bush and told him to go to Pharaoh.

Moses asked God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

And Moses goes on questioning.

“What name of God should I give the Israelites?”

“But what if they do not believe me, or listen to what I say?”

Furthermore, Moses says he is not eloquent.

And Moses even asks God to send someone else.

PAUSE

Or what about Jeremiah?

The Lord called Jeremiah to proclaim God’s Word, and Jeremiah challenges God, saying, “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak for I am only a boy.”

And even Mary the mother of our Lord questioned God.

When she was told by the angel Gabriel that she would conceive and bear a child...

When Mary was called, she questioned the veracity of the angel’s words.

She said, "How can this be, since I am still a virgin?"

And then there is Job, who may have been the quintessential example of an individual who questioned, challenged, and struggled with God, because of the GREAT suffering Job endured.

PAUSE

Many-a-time those significant persons in the biblical narrative questioned, challenged, and struggled with God.

But Abraham does none of that.

When Abraham is told by God to go, Abraham simply believes and goes as he is told.

PAUSE

I bring this up, because our ancient forebears of the faith likely appreciated, they likely valued the sparring between God and his people.

And so our ancient forebears even EXPECTED those whom were in relationship with God to question, to challenge, and struggle with God.

After all, the Jewish people originate from Jacob, whose name is changed after he "struggles," literally wrestles with an angel, name Peniel, which means "the face of God."

Jacob wrestles with God.

And then Jacob's name is changed to "Israel," which means "The one who strives with God."

Think about that, "Israel" means "the one who strives with God."

Interesting, isn't it?

There is a whole nation of people in the Middle East, whose name as a nation means "the one who strives with God."

And that name may have resulted in some self-fulfilling prophecy, for unfortunately the Jewish people have faced numerous conflicts throughout history.

The Jewish people have struggled with God to understand why they as a people seem to be constantly oppressed.

But even so, I think, what the ancient forebears of the faith were trying to say with respect to that name “Israel” is that personal relationship...deep, meaningful relationship involves challenges, questions, and struggles between those in the relationship.

That opposed to seeing the name “Israel” as something altogether bad, the challenges, questions, and struggles in relationship are actually what make the relationship stronger.

To strive with God then is a good thing, for it deepens relationship.

PAUSE

Now, my grandmother had a term for the sort of person in a relationship who gives in all the time.

She used a particular term for the type of person who doesn’t speak up for him or herself, who just caters to the other person without question.

The term she would use was “milk toast.”

And, I never asked her exactly what that term is supposed to mean.

What I gather is that toast that is dipped in milk is of course soggy, flimsy, and doesn’t have any durability.

So, in essence, a person described as “milk toast,” is a person who has no backbone.

PAUSE

And I don’t know if I would go so far as to say that Abraham is “milk toast.”

But it is interesting to note that after the birth of Isaac to Sarah and Abraham, and after the near sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham—again another scene in Abraham’s life where he doesn’t question or challenge God...

Abraham is just ready to kill his own son...

But it is interesting to note that after that scene of the near sacrifice of Isaac, Abraham has no further communication with God.

At least nothing is recorded in the Bible.

Furthermore, Abraham's wife Sarah dies in the next scene, after that scene of the near sacrifice of Isaac.

And furthermore, after the near sacrifice of Isaac, the Bible records no further dialog between Abraham and his son Isaac.

Are these details in the story somehow subtle punishments for Abraham's lack of courage to engage God with questions...

Are these punishments for Abraham's decision not to challenge God, not to struggle with God?

Or are these details not so important, that we need not make light of them, that the Biblical narrative is simply shifting away from the story of Abraham to the story Isaac now?

It is hard to say for sure, but it is true that Abraham doesn't question, challenge, or struggle with God, but is all too ready to obey faithfully.

And again, this may NOT have been what our ancient forebears understood as faith, or at least not the type of faith that truly deepens a relationship.

And so, I do wonder if the apostle Paul may indeed have missed something with respect to talking about the faith of Abraham.

PAUSE

Now in our gospel reading today, Jesus tells his disciples about his suffering and death on the cross.

And then, Jesus proceeds to tell the disciples that if any want to become his followers, let them deny themselves, take up THEIR cross and follow him.

And we often speak of OUR quote, unquote "cross" as that which is our personal burden to bear.

We say something like "It's my cross to bear."

Whatever IT may be. An ailment we are carrying with us. A grief we are suffering with. A loss we are enduring.

Now IF we are really self-reflective, we MIGHT speak of our “cross” as denying ourselves, giving up OUR selfish ways so as to obey the will of God.

But, today, I want to spin this idea of the “cross” a little differently.

I want us to think of the cross as a way to deepen our relationship with God, as it relates to what we have been speaking about in this sermon.

Call it “self-empowerment.” Call it “self-assurance.” Call it “self-esteem.” Call it having the daring to question and challenge God.

Which may at first fly in the face of what it means to deny one’s self when taking up the cross.

PAUSE

But when I think about Jesus on the cross, you know what comes to mind?

Jesus’ words, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Think about those words for a moment.

Think about that question Jesus poses to God the Father.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Think about the direct challenge Jesus levels at God.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Think about the struggle Jesus is experiencing—his struggle with the heavenly Father in that precise moment.

Forget about Moses, Jeremiah, Mary, Job, or any others in the Bible.

That declaration from Jesus on the cross is the epitome of what it is to question, to challenge, and to struggle with God.

And this then is the so-called “cross” I would challenge us to take up.

That we can be that vulnerable before God to express with courage what is on our hearts.

That we can be truly honest with God so as to speak courageously from our deepest emotions.

To tell God exactly how we feel. To unburden our spirits to God.

Whatever the words we need to use...

Whatever the sentiment we need to get out—anger, frustration, despair, rejection, sadness, you name it.

The bible it would seem, and especially the image of Christ on the cross, gives us not just the liberty, but all but beckons us to speak our hearts to God.

Again, why? Because this is how our relationship in faith with God is deepened.

And not that Abraham wasn't faithful to God, but on the score of questioning, challenging, and struggling with God, he may have fallen short.

Let us not follow suit. But instead, let us be empowered to open our hearts entirely to God.

And this will be the cross we bear. Thanks be to God. AMEN.