Proper 14 C

August 7, 2016

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All Saints’, Wolcott

*Faith is the assurance of things hoped for; the conviction of things not seen.”*

 I’ve been meditating this week on several things in relation to the readings for this morning. I’ve been contemplating empty promises and the promises of God, the stars in the heavens and the dream of God, journeys into the future, and, above all, the mystery and the gift of faith. Some of my meditations have been occasioned by this morning’s readings, and some by other readings which have spoken to me of faith and hope, and our good stewardship of those divine gifts.

 “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for; the conviction of things not seen.” By faith, Abraham followed the word of God which called him out of his comfortable home and into a journey into a future he could not have imagined; all the result of a conversation with the Lord of heaven and earth. In the strength and swagger of his youth, Abraham had asked of God an heir and was told there would be one; yet, after many years of trying, Abram and his wife Sarai still had no child. So Abram questioned God’s plan and God’s motives: “What will you give me,” he demands, “for I continue childless.” And God says to him in the Scripture “Look up at the stars – that’s how many your descendants will be.” Abram looked up into the night sky and saw written there the promise of God. And it was enough to send him packing on a journey into a future beyond his dreams; a future in which he would become a father “even though he was too old” (“as good as dead,” reads the narrative) and would become known as the “Father of a multitude” of the people of God. And we, today, are a part of that vast multitude!

A millennium or so years later, in the lesson we heard this morning from the prophet Isaiah, we learn that the people of God had forgotten their roots and the covenant they exchanged with their God. The Lord had promised them steadfast, unswerving love and, in return, they had promised to be faithful to God and follow the commandments laid down for them – in essence, to love the Lord their God with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love their neighbors as themselves. But they had fallen away from the life of faith and run after other gods, even though outwardly they continued to worship God in the rituals of their “solemn assemblies.” Sodom and Gomorrah, those notorious cities which are famous icons of inhospitality and sexual abuse, are particularly singled out in Isaiah’s account of the Lord’s displeasure with the wayward people of Israel. The Lord pleads with them to return and be forgiven: “though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow.” The people of God had forgotten God. They had forgotten that they were part of that starry multitude of descendants of the great icon of their faith and had placed their hope in other gods – some made of gold, some made of wood, some made of stone. They feared the wrath of those gods and forgot the love which the Creator God had promised. I was reminded of this by a passage in a book I am reading for pleasure this summer.

The Outermost House: A Year of Life on the Great Beach of Cape Cod, was written in 1928 by Henry Beston, A few nights ago, I came across a passage that reminded me of Abram and the development of faith among the people of God, and how it affects us today. “Our fantastic civilization has fallen out of touch with many aspects of nature,” write Beston, “and with none more completely than with night. Primitive folk, gathered at a cave mouth round a fire, do not fear night; they fear, rather, the energies and creatures to whom night gives power; we of the age of the machines, having delivered ourselves of nocturnal enemies, now have a dislike of night itself. With light and ever more lights, we drive the holiness and beauty of night back to the forests and the sea . . . Are modern folk, perhaps, afraid of night? Do they fear that vast serenity, the mystery of infinite space, the austerity of stars? Having made themselves at home in a civilization obsessed with power, which explains its whole world in terms of energy, do they fear at night for their dull acquiescence and the pattern of their beliefs?”\*

We fear many things in our own 21st Century civilization. Are we afraid of night, of stars, of fear itself? In what do we, today, place our faith? In money? Power? Prestige? In the promises of political candidates of every stripe, both near and far? All these are fleeting. God’s promise is steadfast and forever. Jesus calls us out of the Gospel with a promise: “Do not be afraid, little flock; it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

When we pray in the words our Savior taught us, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,” do we really mean it? Or are those just words that are part of the ritual of our “solemn assemblies?” Do we really hope for and work toward the dream of God, the promise of a kingdom in which differences are not just tolerated but celebrated, and the will of God for justice, mercy, and peace, exercised in love, is fulfilled? Do we work consciously and intentionally for the coming of that kingdom in our own time? Where does our treasure lie? Is it in possessions, power, prestige, or is it in the promise of the Creator God of a homeland and a city prepared for us in the heavenly realm?

We are, all of us, on a journey of faith which is as significant and important as that of Abraham. Our children and our children’s children will have faith because of the legacy of faith and trust which we have in God; of hope and love not just here in this earthly life, but in the fullness of life beyond the grave, where Jesus has prepared for us a heavenly home and the kingdom already exists in all its glory. The journey has barely begun. Fear is the cog in the wheel which will slow us down or stop us in our tracks. Love is the engine which will carry us forward into the future to find the treasure which we are promised as heirs of the kingdom of God. Let us not fear to strike out into that new world.

I want to share with you two pieces of literature which I believe give encouragement and light to our journey. The first is from poet Maya Angelou:

 “Love is that condition in the human spirit so profound that it empowers us to develop courage; to trust that courage and build bridges with it; to trust those bridges and cross over them so we can attempt to reach each other.”\*\*

The second is the Prayer of Sir Francis Drake, a 16th Century English sea captain and explorer:

Disturb us, Lord, when we are too well pleased with ourselves,

When our dreams have come true

Because we have dreamed too little,

When we arrived safely

Because we sailed too close to the shore.

Disturb us, Lord, when

With the abundance of things we possess

We have lost our thirst

For the waters of life;

Having fallen in love with life,

We have ceased to dream of eternity

And in our efforts to build a new earth,

We have allowed our vision

Of the new Heaven to dim.

Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly,

To venture on wider seas

Where storms will show your mastery;

Where losing sight of land,

We shall find the stars.

We ask You to push back

The horizons of our hopes;

And to push into the future

In strength, courage, hope, and love.\*\*\*

\*- The Outermost House: A Year of Life on the Great Beach of Cape Cod, by Henry Beston. © 1977 (1928) Paprback 1992: St. Martin’s Press, NY, NY. [Orig. pub. 1949, Henry Holt and Co.] p. 165-166.

\*\* - Published on Facebook Aug., 2016 with no provenance

\*\*\* - unattributed version, dated 1577, supposedly found in Drake’s diary