

Based on Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-12. *Abraham as a Paragon of Faith*

"Without reflection," says the management consultant Margaret Wheatley, "we go blindly on our way, creating more unintended consequences, and failing to achieve anything useful."

For many of us, this is how we lived pre-COVID. Without reflection, blindly caught up in a dead end job, perhaps, or conversely rising rapidly through a profession that maybe lined our pockets but did not sing through our spirits.

For many of us, this is how we have lived *through* COVID, without reflection, frantically maneuvering our way through uncertainty and chaos, keeping things going as best we could, with the hope that one day, someday, normality might return and calm might be restored.

For all of us, whether it happened early on or is only just beginning, COVID has demanded a Great Reflection: jolting us out of inertia, demanding a re-evaluation of our values and our assumptions. Forcing a fresh scrutiny of our firmly held commitments. Insisting upon a forward-looking appraisal of our opportunities for realigning our day-to-day functioning with a vision of wholeness and happiness, meaning and purpose.

Such is The Great Reflection also galvanizing the author of the Letter to the Hebrews in our Lesson this morning.

A spiritual lethargy has settled into their spirits, two generations after Jesus, as they wait and wait and wait for the vision of justice and wholeness they have been promised in The Way of Jesus to come to fruition. Widespread martyrdom has not yet ensued in earnest, but the surrounding culture has certainly sidelined the church.

The culture, itself, has given up on faith. That very word, *faith*, which is *pistos*, in Greek, has become by this time associated with one of the spirits who escaped Pandora's box and fled back to heaven, abandoning humanity. The concept of Faith - with or without works - in this culture, is definitely dying, if it is not already dead.

The church cannot follow suit! our author insists.

*We are not among those who shrink back when times are tough*, our author says, in the passage just before our Lesson. Only our faith - only our capacity to trust in the Providence of God, only our capacity to trust in a vision of justice and peace, *even when all evidence points to the contrary* - can save us from despair.

Yes, it may look like the world is falling apart all around us, our author admits. But faith is not about how things *look*. Faith is a posture of perception, a capacity to imagine beyond the present moment, *a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul* that sustains an alternative vision for who humanity can be in this life and the next.

Not that it does not matter what we can see, our author says. In fact, creation itself, in its seasons of cold and hot, dry and rain, night and day; creation itself, in its cycles of flourishing and destroying and flourishing again; creation itself offers a model of the workings of faith! As the Episcopal priest Katherine Bush says, in her commentary on this Lesson, *even the secular physicist might agree with the idea that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.*

And don't forget Abraham, our author says. The patriarch of faith. Talk about holding on to a vision of blessing and prosperity in a land of promise and plenty, even when all evidence points to the contrary! Abraham is one hundred years old before he even sees a *glimmer* of the promise coming true, through the birth of his second son. And the vision of an actual, *physical* land of promise and plenty? The only part of that physical land Abraham ever owns in his lifetime is a graveyard he buys in which to bury his beloved wife. And yet Abraham still holds onto faith and is rewarded for it through many generations to come.

The truth is, though, even as our New Testament author lauds the faith of Abraham, actually reading his story in the Book of Genesis reveals a much more complex narrative. Yes, it is true, Abraham does respond immediately to his perception of God's call to leave his home and venture forth, sight unseen, toward this new vision of blessing and prosperity. But he also, like us, questions God's timing and God's methods of bringing that vision to reality when things do not unfold as quickly as he thinks they should. And let's face it, Abraham's ethics are iffy at best.

A famine sends Abraham down to Egypt, where he pawns off his wife as his sister to be Pharaoh's concubine, in order to save his own skin. A fierce rivalry with Abraham's sibling shudders through multiple generations of descendants. Abraham does amass great wealth toward his vision of prosperity, but his methods utilize trickery and deceit as much as hard work and careful investment. And, don't forget, Abraham nearly murders his one son, while casting the other into the desert along with his mother.

Not exactly a paragon of virtue to emulate for twenty-first century faith!

And yet, biblical scholars agree, Abraham's trust in the providence of God, as shaky and even immoral as it may be at times, Abraham's vision of blessing and prosperity, even when all evidence points to the contrary, becomes a turning point in the moral history of humanity, reversing the accumulation of curses and punishments in the biblical narratives that come before, and forming the foundation of what will turn out to be three of the great religions of the world.

Not because of Abraham's inherent goodness. Not because of Abraham's adherence to any particular religion or regulation. Just because God wants to bless him. And because Abraham accepts the promise of that blessing.

That same God, our author insists, the same Old Testament God who blesses Abraham and Sarah with a vision of promise and prosperity, is the same New Testament God whose faithfulness to humanity is revealed in The Way of Jesus. That same God, our author insists, continues to cast a vision of blessing for you and for me and

for all of our descendants, even when all evidence points to the contrary. And we have the same choice Abraham does, when everything around us says that vision is lost.

We can give up on faith. Call it old fashioned, perhaps. Or leave it to the purview of Christian nationalists and those who seek to roll back the rights of women or the LGBTQIA+ community. We can lament, as the ancient Greco-Romans did, that faith has abandoned us, so we abandon faith.

Or we can persevere together, through this Great Reflection imposed upon us by COVID. We can reclaim our heartfelt conviction in God's glorious reign of peace, in spite of all evidence to the contrary. We can *provoke one another to love and good deeds, and encourage one another*, as the author of the Hebrews admonishes, with a vision of wholeness and hope, of promise and possibility, that is larger than any one of us and longer than any of our lifetimes.

As the great Robin Williams says in *Dead Poets Society*, quoting Walt Whitman: *the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.*

*What will that verse be?*