

Abraham Hears The LORD – A model to us.

Lent 2
March 2019

Genesis 15. 1-12, 17-18

God's Covenant with Abram

15 After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” ² But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” ³ And Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.” ⁴ And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.” ⁵ And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” ⁶ And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

⁷ And he said to him, “I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.” ⁸ But he said, “O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?” ⁹ He said to him, “Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” ¹⁰ And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. ¹¹ And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

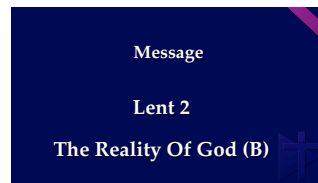
¹² As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. ¹³ Then the LORD said to Abram, “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. ¹⁴ But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. ¹⁵ As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. ¹⁶ And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”

¹⁷ When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. ¹⁸ On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, ¹⁹ the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, ²⁰ the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, ²¹ the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.”

With reference to

12 Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. **2** And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. **3** I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Introduction:



Second consideration of the reality of God.

Q1.

How does God become real to people?

How might that happen?

A problem we all face is living with an existing tradition. We do not have a blank slate. Our consciousness has usually been primed.

This is why it seems at times that new converts from outside church and tradition of faith have it simple.

- No complicated or vague God language to navigate.
- No images or songs etc, then....
- No expectations
- No rules

Then they may meet reality of God in some way.

Can you imagine what that might be like? Is this your story?

As a teenager in a Catholic boys school I thought I was being given answers to questions before I thought to ask them. It was like teaching surfing without ever having experienced waves. You could feel that your head is full of words, pictures and more about God even without ever having met God.

What I want to do this this morning is go back almost to the beginning of the story of faith in God and explore what that coming to faith in God might have been like for Abraham?

This is a bit speculative and partly based on how I experience God so I offer this as a possible insight for your encouragement.

So, knowing what I know now,

Q1a.

How might God have become real to Abraham?

What pointers are there in the story that might be of help to us?



Development

At some point Abraham heard in words and pictures messages he believed were from who we refer to as 'God'.

Q How did he get to the point of even listening to 'God'?

Q How did he get to the point of knowing that the LORD or 'God' was talking to him?

My clue to this is my experience of the empty wild places.

In Eindhoven and most of Europe we live in a technosphere. That is a place created by people. It's also referred to as the 'anthrosphere' which means people or human space.

All around us are shapes and colours, sights and sounds created by people. It's all about us and the structures, ideas and images characteristic of our minds and the cultures we form. As Winston Churchill said about architecture: "We shape our buildings: therefore they shape us."¹

You might experience it like a mirror? This is all human stuff which surrounds us and holds our attention. This is what civilizations do. The more technology we have the more we surround ourselves with things of our own making. It's a tight loop.

Here is the point: Abraham did not live in a technosphere. He lived in a biosphere. He lived in a world that reflected less of that people did and pointed to there being a greater creator above, beyond, around all that he saw.

Some years ago I read that there are apparently three places in the Netherlands that are silent. That is three places where you do not hear a motorway, planes or machines and it is totally quiet but for the wind and birds. I wonder how many places there are that are dark, where on a moonless night you would not see anything?

¹ For more relevant quotes go to <https://www.workflowmax.com/blog/architecture/top-101-exceptionally-badass-quotes-architecture-design-legends>

Abram and many others until recent time knew what it was to sit in the created biosphere without any human objects or sounds.

While we may find a place without human sounds or objects we typically still have a few things happening inside us at any one time. Words, feelings, thoughts, memories and more rattle around inside us. The mind can be a very busy place!

I hope you recognize what I am describing? Familiar?

What I have experienced at times when sitting alone in God's creation for some time is firstly, deep silence and then the sense that I am not alone. Deep silence and the sense of being in the company of something that makes me want to be very still. It's very precious.

So what I have experienced is that when we make ourselves very small and attentive, we may become aware of the deep presence around us.

I wonder how many people can relate to this - the sense of presence around us when alone and quiet in a natural space? I have experienced this alone in a dark room as well.

In this experience of knowing that you are not alone we may sense the goodness and depth of it. It is for me in my mind about being aware of a personal presence in the depth of existence. It's about being aware that I am not alone and tasting that personal presence.

Q2

What do you do in that place?

What might you do in that place of being aware of a personal presence in the fabric of reality?

A2

You might reach out and say 'Hello'?

I think this is involved in what we read as: 'calling on the name of the LORD'.

This is about acknowledging the presence encountered.

It may be about offering homage and devotion to one who is greater than me, the one Paul Tillich described as the 'ground of our being' or Greek poets quoted by Paul in Acts 17 referred to as 'the one in whom we live and move and have our being'.

I read these accounts of Abraham and some before him as 'calling on the name of the LORD' as people reaching out to the great personal presence they experienced as 'Lord of creation', the personal goodness and depth that surrounds us, if we recognize him/her.

I am talking about the beginnings of faith in God.
Is this making sense to you????

When we call upon the name of the LORD and acknowledge him/her, he/she just might say something to us. I am saying 'he/she' because at this point gender is not governed by any image or convention. That will come later.

I am not saying this is a recipe or technique but its part of my experience and something I relate to the stories of Abraham and the language used.

This is about meeting God in a personal and real way that leads to relationship.

- So we may have awareness of a transcendent powerful presence in reality.
 - Typically in places that are richly natural as God's creation rather than ours
- We may call out to invite relationship
 - or offer devotion in recognition of greatness.
- We may at times feel addressed or spoken to in some way.

Personal faith is now possible.

This is what the Abraham story models to us and what Abraham pioneered.

Once you encounter the goodness of God's presence there comes the opportunity to trust.

Then once you feel addressed in some way comes the opportunity for specific personal faith.

From a much later time in the Book of Deuteronomy something touches on this when Moses frames the Law as God's Word to his people:

¹¹“For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. ¹²It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ ¹³Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ ¹⁴But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.

Deuteronomy 30:11-14

“For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.

God's word is close and you can do it if, you exercise faith.

This makes perfect sense in light of what I have been talking about.

The presence and communication of ‘God’ or the Lord of creation is close, very close.

If we are silent and attentive, it will come to us.

If we call on the One who is there, The LORD will speak.

When the Lord speaks, however we hear that, we may live in faith.

This is the story of Abraham I see.

The LORD he encounters when he calls upon the One who is there.

The LORD whom he seeks in worship with sacrifice at altars.

This One who promises him land, descendants and relationship even when he thinks it is impossible.

Abraham does not need to do anything.

He just needs to believe.

That is faith.

Faith comes through hearing what is said because it's then we can exercise trust.

Later Paul would point out that through this sort of faith we are made right with God.

Our unworthiness to know the LORD is overcome through our faith in the Word of the LORD.

Conclusion



I have spoken about how Abraham may have grown in relationship with God to become a pioneer of faith in God.

Towards some application:

It begins with seeking the One who is there to be met in the depth of existence.

Good places to do that are alone in creation. Deserts are ideal places for that. Lonely quiet places without distraction where you can be yourself and sense the deep other presence of God to the point where you know his voice. It may only be a few words or a picture but that's enough to begin the adventure of faith and living as a person of faith in more than ourselves, even when every other indication says that is impossible.

What is more real, the One who speaks in the deep silence or the words from the human world around us?