

“We Trust in God”  
 delivered Sunday, February 28, 2010  
 by Rev. Agnes W. Norfleet, pastor  
 Shandon Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC  
 Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18  
 2<sup>nd</sup> in 4 Part Series on A Brief Statement of Faith

Just two weeks ago, when I was thinking about beginning this Lenten series of sermons on what we say we believe, I was reading the Sunday *New York Times* and a line in an obituary caught my attention. William Tenn was an early science fiction writer of space adventures and top-secret government experiments gone awry and a faculty member at Penn State. When he died at the age of 89 a couple of weeks ago, his form of literature was described as modern, dealing with the industrial and scientific revolutions, and then the last line of the obituary said this: “As for his own identity, he declared, ‘I am a very rational Jewish orthodox – atheist – mystic.’” (1) Now, I am not sure how it is possible to put the words, “Jewish orthodox atheist,” together in one breath to describe a religious perspective, but I must say when I read it, it seemed a sign of the times, of people trying to discern precisely what we believe.

If you keep up with the Best Seller lists in the *New York Times*, then you know there has been a pretty scholarly debate in print about the existence of God in recent years. A couple of years back some of the best selling books carried titles like *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* and *The Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Nonbeliever* by the popular journalist Christopher Hitchens; and *The God Delusion* by the well respected zoologist, Richard Dawkins. Today, those volumes are being answered by a variety of voices – from serious biblical scholars to journalists to leaders of congregations who have their arguments for the existence of God in print now with titles like: *The Reason for God*, *The Case for Faith*, and *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*. (2)

When I was back on the campus of Davidson College last week for a conference, and thinking about today’s sermon, I remembered that well over thirty years ago, the first paper students were asked to write as entering freshmen in Davidson’s Humanities program was “Prove the existence of God.” Those of us who were lucky had been warned there was no way to answer that question based on reason alone, to say so, and then simply to be articulate about whatever arguments we made. Of course you cannot prove the existence of God with a pen and piece of paper but, as I remember it, we were being forced to think about matters of reason and revelation. All these years later, I guess I finally see the value in that little assignment which seemed like something akin to academic torture at the time.

In today’s intellectual climate about the existence of God, between the radical atheists and the radical fundamentalists – with the broad middle in between where most of us find ourselves on some continuum of faith and doubt – it’s helpful to remember that God is not *thought* into being, or *reasoned*, or *argued* into being. Rather, God is revealed to us by mighty acts of creation and love and redemption and resurrection.

A Brief Statement of Faith, the most contemporary of our Presbyterian confessions, begins each section not by saying, “We can prove God exists,” but rather “We Trust in...” followed by a series of ways that God has chosen to be known in human history. One of the startling things about the initial call of Abram and Sarah back in Chapter 12 is that as soon as God says, “Get up and go to the land I will show you,” they actually just got up and went, no questions asked and they journeyed forward on a promise alone. God speaks; Abram listens.

God promises; Abram believes. God commands; Abram obeys. (3) That is not the way most of us come to faith exactly, but it turns out Abram didn't come to faith that way either. In today's reading – three chapters, a problem with his nephew Lot, a problem with Pharaoh flirting with Sarah, and a war with four kings *later*, Abram begins to ask questions! He still has no descendent to speak of and there's no Promised Land in sight. Who in the world is this God, Abram wants to know and how on earth is God going to fulfill the promises made?

By the time we get to chapter 15, I breath a sigh of relief to hear that we do have more in common with the first family of faith than the initial call might lead us to believe – they doubt, they question, they wrestle God to the mat for answers. In today's text, Abram might as well be saying, "Look, God, it is unclear to me how you are going to work all these things out. There are some pretty big obstacles in the way of your promises. You promised us descendents and there is no sign of pregnancy much less a baby. You promised us a land in which to settle, and all I see are four Eastern Kings and their possession of the land which is in the way. I'd like to have just a little more information!"

Sometimes I think we get caught up on the notion that faith in God has to be characterized by sure certainty, by some acquired knowledge over time, by some moment of conversion when it all becomes clear. And by God's grace, there come moments of clarity from time to time, when we feel the near presence of the living God. But faith is also characterized by facing perplexing questions – that come in the anxiety of doubt and uncertainty and not knowing.

Back in 1903, the unique and wonderful German poet, Rilke, enjoyed a correspondence with a young aspiring poet, by letters written back and forth, in which he offered this advice, "be patient towards all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves." Then gradually, Rilke suggests, "you will live into the answers." (4)

Isn't that the same advice that God gives Abram in this ancient story, "Come, Abram, let's go outside and look toward heaven at the stars, and just try to count them...so numerous shall your descendents be..." From the very beginning of God's interaction with humankind, the journey of faith moves from promise to promise, from one story of revelation to another. Some people grabbed onto the truth of these stories and others have not, but they have been passed down, nonetheless, from generation to generation. Once upon a time...our ancestors were slaves down in Egypt, but by God's mighty hand the waters were parted and they walked into freedom on dry land. Once upon a time...our great grand-mothers and grand-fathers did not know where their next meal was coming from, but it came as if a gift from God in heaven – manna, daily bread. Once upon a time...a man named Jesus of Nazareth came preaching and teaching and people hung onto his every word; he came healing and people clamored to be touched by him; they thought he was killed, but after three days his disciples heard his voice again and saw him in his wounded flesh and they believed in the resurrection. Once upon a time...I had a Sunday School teacher who took us into the church kitchen and showed us how yeast is hidden in bread to make it rise, and he said that faith is like that – you cannot always see it, but you know its there. Once upon a time somebody I loved died, and people from the church showed up, and brought food and cried with us, and together we came to a sense of peace that I cannot fully explain. That is what it means to say, "I trust in God..."

Francis Collins is the Director of the National Genome Research Institute, a consummate scientist who came to faith by an interesting way. He was a nonbeliever, and agnostic on the way to atheism. After he completed his doctorate in physics, he went on to medical school. He remembers treating a woman dying of heart disease. "She was very clear about her faith," he has said, "and she looked me in the eye and she said, 'What do you believe?'" He recalls he sort of

stammered out, “I am not sure.” His patient died in her faith, and he began to think about religion, for the first time, as a scientist. He became a believer in God – as God is revealed in the Bible story after story. Scientific discovery, the amazing tracking of human DNA in the Genome Project, has caused him to believe in God even more deeply, in God’s creativity and goodness. His scientific discovery, Collins says, is an act of worship. (5)

We come to faith not based on proof positive, any more than a mother’s love can be proven beyond a shadow of a doubt, but is based on small, daily acts of care, and on promises that are made and kept over a long period of time. When I dip my fingers in the baptismal font, and then touch young Mason Reed Swann with the waters of baptism, I don’t know how it works exactly, but all I can say is that I really believe that by water and prayer and blessing and promises we make this morning together, he himself – at eight months old – has already passed through the Red Sea with ancient Israel. Any sin that might separate him from God’s love has already been washed clean. He has descended into the Jordan River with Jesus himself, and been raised to new life in his name. How do I know? I don’t know. All I can say is that along with Abraham and Sarah, and by the nurture and witness of the church of Jesus Christ, I have come to trust the promises of God to be true.

I simply trust in God. AMEN.

#### NOTES

- 1) Gerald Jonas, “William Tenn, Science Fiction Author, Is Dead at 89.” *New York Times*, 2/14/10.
- 2) *New York Times* online.
- 3) Dan Debevoise, *Feasting on the Word*, Vol. 2, C. p. 50.
- 4) William Sloane Coffin, *Letters to a Young Doubter*, Preface.
- 5) John Buchanan, “Darwin, Intelligent Design, and ‘Old Hundreth,’” *Fourth Presbyterian*, Chicago, 11/20/05.