

**August 12<sup>th</sup>, 2007 Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost**

A few years ago, my brother in law's father, Jim, began to have severe recurrent headaches. Shortly after his headaches began, Jim then began to experience some weakness on the right side of his body. Then one day while out on the golf course Jim realized that he could no longer see out of his right eye. Fearful that he was having a stroke Jim was rushed to the emergency room.

Shortly thereafter, it was discovered that Jim had not had a stroke, but that he had an inoperable brain tumor. After several tests and a biopsy of the tumor, Jim's doctors decided that the tumor was too far advanced and that conventional treatments could offer little hope either to save or even extend Jim's life. Jim's doctors recommended that he travel to Boston and look at some experimental treatment options. After one of Jim's early trips to Boston, he was accepted into a clinical study at Massachusetts General Hospital.

Unfortunately, after Jim completed some of the experimental treatments it was discovered that the treatment was doing little to arrest growth of his brain tumor so Jim left the study. Jim in his early 50's, died 9 months after his diagnosis just a few weeks before the birth of his first grandchild. His family and friends had held out hope throughout Jim's ordeal that something miraculous might happen that would extend his life, unfortunately the miracles they had hoped for failed to materialize.

This morning our Old Testament lesson is a small snippet from the story of Abraham and Sarah. The snippet we are treated to is one of the earliest stories we have about Abraham in Genesis. Abram, not yet renamed Abraham, is lamenting to God about his inability to have an heir for his household. God listens to Abraham's complaint and then takes Abraham outside into the clear crisp dark night. God then has Abraham gaze into the sky and as Abraham is gazing at the stars, God tells him that his descendents will be as numerous as the stars. Abraham believes what God has told him.

Perhaps the most interesting fact of this story is that Abram is at least 75 years old when he had this encounter. And he will not have a son with his wife, Sarah, until she is into her nineties and Abraham, a youthful 100 years old. Much of the story of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis centers around Abraham's **faithfulness to God** and God's **promise** that he will have descendents as numerous as the stars.

For every Abraham and Sarah, who conceives a child miraculously against the odds, there are countless other faithful people who will try for years to conceive a child and yet fail because biology is stacked against them or medical science can offer little hope.

For every person who in some way is miraculously cured, there are many more faithful people who like Jim, succumb to the diseases and tragedies of this world.

Stories, like the story of Jim are often where I experience a disconnect, a disconnect between the lives that we know where often the miraculous never seems to materialize and the stories of the lives of those in scripture, like Abraham and Sarah where eventually a miracle occurs.

This disconnect often feels like a wide chasm that stands between God's faithful and his kingdom, only made wider when we hear words, like the words that Jesus this morning, speaks to his disciples reminding them to "fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom..."

We wonder, "Why have we not seemingly received the kingdom?" "Why is there still suffering in this world?" "Why did Jim suffer and why was somebody else healed?" "Why do bad things happen to good and faithful people?"

These questions and many more swirl about in the chasm that stands at times between God and His faithful.

Toward the end of the letter to the Hebrews, the author speaks about the faithful and he not only is talking about people like Abraham and Sarah. But he is also talking about faithful people who suffer tragically, like Abel, the son of Adam and Eve, who pleases God with his offering and then is violently slain by his brother Cain, jealous that God found Abel's offering pleasing.

The author of Hebrews then expresses that the faithful have somehow acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth... or as Eugene Peterson puts it, the faithful recognized that they were "transients" in this world. That somehow they were just passing through and that they were not home yet. That their desire was not for this world, but that they desired "a better country, that is a heavenly one."

For all the good things that happened to them and for all the bad--  
- they could recognize that this world was not their home. That there was something more that awaited them. Something glorious.

Something that the writer of Hebrews said they saw and greeted it from a far. They were able to glimpse beyond the veils of this earth and just for a moment like Abraham they glimpsed into the mystery and majesty of the heavens seeing the possibilities of God's kingdom.

However, like each of us, the faithful people whom the letter to the Hebrews speaks of were people also with their feet firmly planted on this earth. People with the same questions about God! I'm sure Abraham and Sarah wondered if God was really going to deliver this promised baby.

Somehow though faithful are able to take those promises and moments in which they saw God's kingdom from a far and allow the chasm between them and God's kingdom to be bridged.

Unfortunately, we find the bridge over that chasm is rickety and old. One of those bridges that you see only in the movies, found only deep in the jungle, over a bottomless gorge held up with frayed rope and twisted vines, missing many of its floor planks. A bridge that threatens to snap at any moment.

It is a bridge that only allows its passenger----- a few steps out onto it and then begins to creak and sway **so much so** that the passenger in fear must retreat to his side of the gorge. It's a bridge that only affords us a closer look at the other side.

For we are faithful strangers in this land, our side of the chasm is a land of exile, and we are only afforded glimpses occasionally beyond that chasm, the one that stretches between us and God's kingdom. However, some of us can place our hopes in the fact that we throughout our lives will be afforded glimpses of the kingdom beyond this world, a kingdom however that we must journey toward through the injustices of this life. AMEN