

Sermon preached at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, CT

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I love language. I love story and literature, and I love words. I squeezed seven years of language into high school- four years of French and three of Latin. In college I majored in French, and later I received a masters in French literature. In seminary, I took both biblical Greek and Hebrew. I felt I *had* to learn to read in both Hebrew and Greek, because the stories of Scripture are written in those languages. Language matters. Words matter.

Today's readings are evidence of the importance of words, of nuance and study instead of quick reading. *Abraham believed the Lord, and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness. Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen.* Both the Genesis and Hebrews readings deal with belief. Both of them can appear binary and exclusionary if read carelessly, as if belief is just a thing you have or you don't, as if belief is static, either present or absent. But if we give the readings the time and close study they deserve, they say something else entirely. They show that belief is an attitude rather than a quality, and this provides me with a great deal of hope. Belief is a posture one has towards life, towards God. Belief is cultivated over a lifetime, a lifetime of relationship with God.

Today's story from Genesis, even though it's brief, is one of my favorite Abraham stories. And there are *a lot* of stories about Abraham. Some are heartbreaking, like when he was told to sacrifice his son, or when at his wife's bidding he cast out Hagar and Ishmael. Some are pretty funny, like when not once but twice, he made his wife Sarah pretend to be his sister to trick a king. Most of the stories about Abraham showcase his faith in God. God told Abraham to pack up everything and go into Canaan- so he did. God became angry at an unrighteous city and Abraham pleaded for mercy, which God granted. God promised Abraham offspring more numerous than the stars, and Abraham believed, and it happened, even though Abraham and Sarah were both quite old.

Yes, there are a lot of stories about Abraham, but today's is special. It's tender and intimate. Abraham and God are discussing God's promise of an heir. By the *end* of the passage Abraham believes, but that does not describe his feeling throughout. You see, Abraham's belief is not a static thing. God says to Abraham, do not be afraid. Abraham responds, basically, but I *am* afraid. I'm *worried*. God comforts Abraham and promises him an heir, and as many descendants as there are stars in the sky. God *reassures* Abraham, so that by the end of their conversation Abraham believes.

אָמַן, the verb translated as “believe” in Genesis, means to confirm or support in its basic form. Abraham believed is a good translation, and trust would work as well: Abraham trusted God. This verb is related to *Amen*. When we say *amen*, aren't we putting our trust in God? Aren't we saying, *it's up to you, Lord?* So another way to look at this interchange is that Abraham brings his fears to God, God says, *I have a plan. It's going to be okay. I will keep my promises.* And Abraham says *Amen*.

The portion of Hebrews we read today also deals with Abraham and his faith. The author of Hebrews begins with the famous line: *now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen.* I bristle at that sentence. I struggle with the word *assurance*: faith is the assurance of things hoped for. Assurance, for me, denotes certainty, as does *conviction* in the next line. Some people can equate faith and assurance, but I sure can't.

So, I went to the Greek text itself to explore. The word translated as assurance, ὑπόστασις, means substance or reality as well as assurance. So faith is the realness, the substance, of things hoped for. This helps me. The fact, reality, substance of things hoped for- things that aren't visible, aren't here yet- is what faith is. Assurance makes it sound like I can't have any doubt, but the Greek seems to say that faith is about acknowledging the realness of the things that aren't yet, not about being sure. I don't have to be *sure* to feel in my heart that there is more to this world than what I can see. I don't have to be *sure* to have glimpses of the divine, and to trust that those glimpses are part of something much greater, part of God.

Remember, the author of Hebrews is talking about Abraham. Abraham's belief comes not from assurance but from his trust in the substance, the reality, of God. Assurance, really, negates Abraham's story, which the author recaps so well: “by faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” Faith, belief, is being able to trust the concreteness of the things we cannot see now but yearn for, the things which undergird us all. Faith is looking forward to the city that has foundations, to the kingdom of God. Abraham is *not* sure, and that's okay. It's okay because he believes in God even when he can't see a way forward, *especially* when he can't see a way forward, and God assures him.

Faith itself becomes more interesting in the Greek. In Greek, the word for faith and belief, πίστις, has to do with trust and confidence, not an intellectual assent. It comes from πείθω, most commonly used to mean to persuade. The idea of being persuaded by God, persuaded in God. Coming to trust and have confidence in God. It's a lifelong process. The more time I spend with

God, the more I am persuaded by God's goodness. I sure hope that is reckoned to me as righteousness.

We can hear these two readings in a binary, either you have faith or you don't way, or we can hear them as an invitation to cultivate belief in God who is always good, God who always keeps promises, God who is concrete, a strong foundation, even when we cannot see it. *That* is where I find hope. Abraham needs to be persuaded, from time to time, that God will come through in his life. He takes his questions to God and finds faith there. Faith isn't blind following, or intellectual certainty; no, faith is the willingness to name, follow, and trust in the things unseen, the things that we yearn for, the things to come. This is what Abraham does. He says *Amen* to God's promise, and that counts as righteousness.

We too can be persuaded by God, we too can hold onto the realness, the substance, of God's promise. We can bring our fears and questions to God. We can say Amen when God calls us into new vocations. We can say Amen when God calls us into difficult but necessary conversations. We can say Amen when God fills us with holy frustration at the gap between the world as it is and the world as it should be. In the face of grim reality, in the face of violence and pain and disappointment and despair, we can hold onto the promise of God and say Amen.