

## Falling Down and Getting Up

The mass shooting in Florida, the slaughter of some 300 children in Syria, the never ending revelations that Mr. Putin is doing his best to upend our system of government while the man in the White House demands an investigation not of Russia but of his political opponents, the call for the Pentagon to develop low yield nuclear weapons, making such satanic arms more likely to be used; we live in times when our collective rejection of the faith of Abraham, Paul and Jesus is bearing its ugly harvest.

And so it is most appropriate this Lenten season to begin our worship with the confession of our sin; "sin" being defined not as this or that foible or failure of personal morality as much as "sin" being our refusal to trust God in all things.

In a broken world begging to be healed, I cannot become a healer without first coming to grips with my own brokenness.

If I am ever able to confront the evil that seems to be running rampant these days, I must first come to grips with the truth that the line between good and evil runs not between "us and them," but through the very center of my own soul.

Once I can come to grips with that fundamental fact, then perhaps the many trials and tribulations that confront us every day can begin to be seen not as overwhelming tides, but as part and parcel of the long and tortuous road that indeed leads to salvation.

Truth be told, our road to salvation is never short and certainly never easy.

Instead, it's something like that old Family Circus cartoon, that has young Billy showing up at home tattered and torn with his mom yelling: "I thought I told you to come straight home!"

"I did," comes the wounded reply, as he recalls coming straight home by way of the tree that had to be climbed, the cat that had to be chased, and the mud puddle that had to be jumped in.

The way of faith, the way of the cross, is never straight, and it's always muddy.

Today's readings assure us that this is nothing new.

We begin with Abraham, a man who at first blush seems to walk straight into salvation, with no doubts, no fears, only trust.

After all, this is the guy willing to sacrifice his only child, simply because God tells him to.

How do you wrap your head around that?

Except, what we have today is not the whole story about Abraham's journey of faith.

You see, today's lesson from Genesis leaves things out, including some mighty important things, actually.

What we don't hear about today is how beautiful Sarah is when the two begin their journey.

Sarah is so beautiful that when they get to Egypt, Abraham is terrified he'll be killed by Pharaoh, so Pharaoh can take Sarah as his wife.

What does trusting, full of faith, paragon of virtue, Abraham do in the face of that fear?

He leans over and whispers to his lovely bride:

"If they ask, I'm your brother, not your husband."

Turns out they do ask, and Pharaoh, believing the lie, brings Sarah into his home as his wife.

God sends plagues, which Pharaoh correctly interprets as signs that Sarah is indeed Abraham's wife, and Pharaoh, the unbelieving heathen, believes God, returns Sarah to Abraham, and scolds Abraham for the deception.

You'd think the father of Judaism, Christianity and Islam would have learned his lesson, but he doesn't.

Not long after, as Abraham and Sarah continue their journey, they walk through another kingdom, and once again, gorgeous Sarah catches a king's eye, and once again, Abraham leans over and says:

"Okay sis, you know the drill!"

This time God sends a dream to the pagan king, who, like Pharaoh, believes God, returns Sarah to her husband Abraham, and scolds Abraham for the deception.

Abraham's trust is still sketchy even when the couple gets very, very old.

You'll notice today that we read Genesis 17:1-7; 15-16.

Missing from today's reading is verse 17, the verse right after God says of Sarah:

"I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her, and she shall give rise to nations, and kings shall come from her."

The very next verse has Abraham falling flat on his face NOT out of joy or reverence or fear at the great power of God; the very next verse has Abraham falling flat on his face ..... LAUGHING!!

I quote:

“Abraham fell flat on his face, and laughed, thinking, “Can a hundred-year-old man father a son, and can Sarah, at ninety, have a baby?”

So here is our paragon of faith, laughing at God’s ridiculous, unimaginable, impossible promise that a 90-year-old woman shall at long last conceive!

And, she does!

Paul writes today about Abraham: “He didn’t weaken in faith...”

“No distrust made him waver...”

But Paul isn’t some dewy-eyed sentimentalist glossing over Abraham’s well-known swerves on his journey of faith.

Instead, Paul sees that in the very midst of Abraham’s messy, muddy, even sinful journey, Abraham keeps walking.

Yes, Abraham trusts God then takes back that trust; yes, Abraham often takes two steps forward and one step back; but through it all, he keeps walking.

Today, we have the benefit of hindsight.

We know that everything turns out fine for Abraham and Sarah: the promised son is born, and this once barren couple indeed are the parents of billions of people and scores of nations.

Abraham and Sarah don’t have the benefit of hindsight.

They, on their journey, like we on ours, can only trust, in the halting, half-disbelieving way we all trust.

That lack of hindsight is what sometimes gets us laughing at dear old Peter.

There he is correctly recognizing Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, only to completely misunderstand who and what the Messiah is.

Poor confused Peter.

Except perhaps we shouldn't be too quick to point fingers, we who are blessed with the vantage point so many years later, with the benefit of hindsight.

Like Abraham, Peter keeps walking; even if he doesn't know where he is going.

They are like the father of the boy beset with seizures, who approaches Jesus and begs for a cure:

"Anything is possible for those who believe," Jesus tells him.

"I do believe!" cries the man from the very core of his being; "Help my unbelief!"

Thank God for Abraham, thank God for Peter, thank God for that father of the stricken boy.

Their human frailty, their doubt, their disbelief, it is a lifeline for each of us.

Left alone, we, like Peter that day, think in terms of glory, which prefers accomplishment to suffering; praise to the cross; wisdom to folly, and thus, when all is said and done, prefers evil to good.

Glory is what people want in a god.

That the cross is the way to salvation is for most a horrible joke.

But Jesus, turning to the crowds, reminds us that giving up is the pathway to receiving, that denying myself is the very doorway to finding myself; that death is the only gateway to real life.

No wonder Peter scolds him.

Would I have done anything differently?

Would you?

So what are we to make of today's situation?

We aren't the first generation to be faced with seemingly overwhelming challenges to basic human dignity.

We aren't the first to be at odds with each other.

But if we can enter the fray with the trust that one day "All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord," then perhaps with Dorothy Day we can say:

"What we do is so little we may seem to be constantly failing.

But, unless the seed fall into the earth and die, there is no harvest.

And why see results?

Our work is to sow."

+amen