

“Blind Trust”

March 13, 2022

Scripture: Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Luke 13:31-35

In his book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, theologian James Cone turns to the words of the immortal Langston Hughes, poet laureate of Black America:

What happens to a dream deferred?  
Does it dry up  
Like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore—  
And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over—  
Like a syrupy sweet?  
Maybe it just sags  
Like a heavy load.

*Or does it explode?*

Hughes gets at the experience of so many people of color in our society who find themselves being told to wait for their dreams of a better life or of success or of justice to come true, to sit tight until conditions change before they can gain access to the tools needed for upward mobility. They're told to put their futures on hold and not dream too big too soon.

Martin Luther King, Jr. expressed the same kind of frustration in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” when answering his clergy critics who have said the movement for civil rights was going too fast. He writes, “Frankly, I have never yet engaged in a direct action movement that was “well-timed,” according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the words, ‘Wait!’ It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This ‘Wait’ has almost always meant ‘Never.’” Having to wait for something to which you're entitled is unjust; it's how people in power control those in a society they want to keep down.

I think our hero Abraham in Genesis may be going through a similar experience, although with a qualitative difference. When we catch up with him, he's still named Abram and is about halfway through his story. He's already encountered God more than once. And he's carrying the promise of offspring in his imagination, wondering just how such a thing is supposed to happen. We never learn why, exactly, God is so slow to fulfill this promise, but there are certain wrinkles in Abram's character that need to be ironed out.

He's been obedient and faithful to God's summons. He left his father's home and all his holdings in Ur to venture out to a land he's never seen. But along the way there were a few missteps. For instance, while sojourning in Egypt, where he and Sarai had gone to escape famine, Abram had her pretend she was his sister because he didn't trust that some powerful Egyptian might not kill him to get to her if it was known they were married. As it happened *the* powerful Egyptian, the Pharaoh himself, wound up taking a shine to Sarai and Abram was forced to confess he was actually her husband. They were kicked out of Egypt over that.

Time and again trust will prove to be Abram's downfall. He just has trouble trusting things will work out the way God says. I think trust is among the biggest challenges for God's people throughout the Bible, in both testaments. The failure of Jerusalem to trust the prophets sent to her drives Jesus to tears, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" It's a lament, not an accusation. We have trouble trusting in this world. We have trouble accepting the possibility that things can change, that we can change, and life can be good.

The prophets Langston Hughes and Martin Luther King called society to a higher vision, a better version of itself. They, along with so many others, offered refuge beneath the wings of justice and compassion, but we aren't willing. Our society continually resists the call to change. We ignore the invitation to a better future. What are we so afraid of? What is it about racial equity or an end to poverty that we find so threatening?

Abram seemed to be constantly shooting himself in the foot. After this encounter, when we're told he was deemed righteous, he goes off on his own again and has a child with Sarai's servant Hagar only to be told, once more, he got it wrong. In fact, in Abram's story, every time he takes matters into his own hands, things fall apart. Because he cannot trust. This story of Abraham's foibles was preserved, I think, because it resonates so deeply with us. The Israelites in exile who first recorded it may have seen in Abraham's story their own struggle to imagine a future when they've been separated from their home and everything that gave them a sense of identity as a people. Just as Abraham had to learn to trust blindly, had to put his faith in God's promise of redemption, so they found reason to trust they would once again be restored.

And, like Abraham, that blind trust was expressed through action. In their case, living in exile, they had to hold fast to their identity; they had to preserve their traditions, keep practicing Torah. They had to remember their ancestors—Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob, Leah and Rachel—that wide cloud of witnesses who made them who they are and whose example could give them hope. And so it would be reckoned to them as righteousness.

Jesus speaks to a people who also need to learn how to trust. He brings a message of redemption, of acceptance, of love, but his world cannot see their own value to God. The same inability to trust we find throughout Israel's story is present for those in power around Jesus. I think we normally attribute malicious intent to those who try him and insist on his death, but I

think it's more a matter of weakness. They don't trust the power that comes with acceptance and compassion. They can't see its potential within themselves. So, they kill their prophets and stone those God sends them.

It's a sad reality, and one that comes uncomfortably close to our own experience. When we hear the voices of those in our society who clamor for justice, the prophets who call us to our highest ideals, and we ignore them or imprison them, it's our own weakness that's revealed. All the calls we're hearing lately to prohibit discussions about our country's history of white supremacy and racial injustice in our classrooms are really admissions of weakness. They're a failure to trust in a higher vision of ourselves, to trust in a better future. And they represent a refusal to take responsibility for our own role in realizing that vision, in moving toward that promised future.

Abraham's story can teach us the power of trust in a promised future even when the evidence denies it. It teaches us the importance of moving forward to pursue our highest selves in spite of the obstacles that stand in our way. Jesus' story can teach us the cost of that pursuit. If we want to see real change in our world, if we want to prevent dreams shriveling like raisins in the sun, then we have to let go of our fears and our hold on power and learn to trust the prophets God sends, allow ourselves to be gathered beneath God's wings. The Herods of this world will always rant and threaten; they'll always want to keep us weak. But God is calling us to see past our own comfort and security. God is calling us to trust a future of justice, compassion and love even though we can't see it yet, to trust what lies on our horizon when we answer God's voice.

Amen