

The History we Would Have Liked

One of the realities about our history as a people of faith that can be troubling to us is the brokenness and fallibility of our ancestors in the faith. It would be nice if they were all of exceptional character and integrity.

I think that, when it comes to our parent’s generation, and especially with the people who impressed us most, we have a tendency to give in to wishful thinking; to lionize them and put them on a pedestal. They grow larger than life in our memories because we forget their faults and focus on their gifts, because their gifts are what inspire us to keep going when the going gets tough.

Nevertheless we are aware that they were in reality, as are all people, fallible human beings, with significant flaws. And if we are willing to admit it, some of the ways they responded to life may even trouble us today.

When we look back to our ancestors, my guess is that what matters most for us is that, in the end, they were able in some way to share the

gift of love. The saints in our lives were people who we recognize as having received the gift of love in their hearts, who you could say were in some way “born from above.” And in spite of their limitations, they struggled to serve and to follow the God who had touched their lives “from above.”

And that struggle to be faithful and to follow the movement of the spirit probably did not follow an entirely predictable course. They didn’t suddenly become perfect and faultless. And their commitment to love brought them face to face with unexpected challenges that they didn’t always deal with well. Nor did they always end up with the same convictions in the end that they started with.

But they did their best to put their faith in God’s leading. They trusted in the promise that somehow, even if it didn’t always seem like it, God was leading them for a good reason and would not let them down. And in spite of whatever drawbacks they had, they left us with a profound legacy that we too could be a part of and carry forward into the future; a legacy that connect us intimately with themselves and with the grace of God.

And perhaps in some way the fact that they were able to leave us with a legacy at all is more moving, because of the struggles they underwent to remain faithful.

Abraham: Flawed but Critical

That is the case with Abram in this morning's first reading. As you may know, Abram, who later becomes Abraham, is considered by Christians, Jews and Muslims alike to be the first ancestor or "father" of the family that enters into a special relationship of faith with God, a covenanted journey. This reading marks the beginning of that journey which extends through the whole Bible, and then through the centuries leading up to this morning. So that you and I are seen as being a part of the next chapter of its unfolding.

When Abraham sets out on his journey of faith, he is not setting out with a foreknowledge of what will happen or with a blueprint for dealing with every situation. He is starting out the way many of us start out in life. He has to decide what his most trustworthy source of guidance is going to be and then he steps forth into the unknown, trusting that somehow things will turn out.

Abraham is leaving everything he has ever known to follow God on this journey, which highlights his courage and willingness to face the unknown. But other than this, the thing that is most striking to me about this great ancestor in the faith, is how unremarkable and flawed he is.

A recent article about him that I read, describes him this way:

Abraham's story provides a realistic picture of a person struggling to be faithful. Abraham is a person of strength, yet he is imperfect in motive, behavior and thought. He remains connected to God and seeks to walk in God's ways. Yet he is a deadbeat dad and casts his children out of his home. He extends gracious hospitality to strangers, yet stands by as Sarah abuses and exploits Hagar, his second wife. He negotiates justice with God, yet places Pharaoh and King Abimelech and their people in danger by telling lies.... Abraham is so human it hurts at times. We want something nobler for the ancestor of the faith. We want him to be exemplary in every way. Time and again, he disappoints us.

We want him to be so much better than we are. But he is not. He is as vulnerable to the ills of ego and selfishness as we are. He is self-centered and self-absorbed, as cold and heartless as we are. He is as ambitious and ruthless, as stubborn and defensive as we are. Yet God chose an imperfect vessel to set in motion the divine plan of redemption for all creation. When the test was most crucial Abraham rose to the occasion. When God called him forth, he trusted in God's promises and set forth.

The Gift of Honesty

I think that one of the great gifts that comes to us from the Bible and stories like the story of Abraham, is its honesty; that it does not succumb to the temptation to tell us only what we want to hear, by providing us with only idealized portraits of our ancestors in the faith. The later Old Testament editors, could have eliminated unflattering passages and written over them with passages of glowing praise. That would have allowed future readers to bask in the glow of believing that we are of exceptional stock, a cut above other peoples. But they didn't. They did write more glowing additions celebrating the ancestors. But they wisely left those more sobering passages as they were.

And the same honesty characterizes the New Testament, so that aside from the example of Jesus, the characters in the Bible who represent our early spiritual ancestors, are not at all the perfect and noble characters we might hope them to be.

And yet, even as it cuts us down to size, none of the Bible stories minimize the importance of these ancestors. Instead, they hold firmly to the understanding that, even out of the midst of brokenness and sin, the glory of God and God's promise still came through; and they were

able to pass on the promise and journey with God to the generations that followed.

So that, I don't think we should be surprised when, in the midst of the brokenness and sin that confronts us now in Lent 2023, it is very likely that we will catch glimpses of a child of Abraham, here and there, keeping the faith; like a little flower sticking out of a cold snowbank, to brighten our days and encourage us in our journey with God.

The Man in Black

I believe I was lucky enough to catch a glimpse last weekend. After Sheryl, Justin and I dropped in here at church for the Pork Dinner, we went over to the Shutesbury Athletic Club to see a Johnny Cash Tribute show. The weather was pretty treacherous, but we had tickets and we didn't want to waste them.

I'm not exactly sure why they call it an Athletic Club, because the only exercise equipment I saw there was beer glasses with handles for lifting and potato chips bags that require strong fingers to pull open. In any case, I wasn't exactly expecting to find sermon material there.

There was a good crowd and we saw several people dressed in black, including the singer who did the first hour of the show. By the way, he

did sound like Johnny Cash and he was very good. Justin, who is a big fan of Johnny Cash, was also in black.

I have always liked Johnny Cash myself. It is clear that he had an attractive natural sincerity about him that comes across in his music and so I was ready to listen with interest. Some of the songs caught me a bit off guard because they were kind of strange. One was about dragging a woman around by the hair and shooting her, which was supposed to be humorous. I found it a slightly strange and troubling selection.

I really enjoyed the song called "One Piece at a Time," which was about building a car out of a lot of different cars. He had a "49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, automobile..." And I really like Johnny Cash's version of the Eagles song "Desperado." The way he sings it is so lonesome and true and beautiful. We didn't hear that one. But of course Johnny Cash recorded a huge number of songs, so it would have been a miracle if he had sung that one.

And then the singer sang a song called the "Man in Black" in which Johnny Cash explains why he wore black. (One reason, he wore black

was because his clothes look clean longer when he was on the road).
But later he wrote a song with more heartfelt reasons.

One of the verses goes like this:

I wear the black for the poor and the beaten down
Livin' in the hopeless, hungry side of town
I wear it for the prisoner who is long paid for his crime
But is there because he's a victim of the times

Well, we all missed Ash Wednesday here because of the snow storm, but when I heard the song I realized that I had received the sacrament of Ash Wednesday after all, because the man dressed in black up front was singing a Lenten meditation for the Man in Black, who wrote the song for the love of Jesus, the original Man in Black.

I'd like to play it for you. You can sing along, if you like.

(print the words on another insert)

You know the thing about Johnny Cash is that today he is such a positive figure. But when he was among us, even though he was greatly loved, he was a mixed bag, "painfully human". He struggled for much of his adult life with an addiction to amphetamines, and had a broken marriage before marrying June Carter (who by the way was related to Jimmy Carter, who was one of his close friends). And although, later on he gave concerts for prisoners in prison, he had also spent the night in jail several times for less than noble reasons.

But as he got older, his sense of compassion came through more strongly, to the point where the record companies didn't want him to play some of his material, because they thought his lyrics about the exploitation of Native Americans would be too controversial and turn listeners off. I didn't know this, but he also studied theology and was an ordained minister, although he kept it to himself (in much the way Mr. Rogers did).

His gravestone in Henderson, Tennessee is a long black marble slab, next to a similar slab for his wife June Carter Cash. And written in gold on the black are the words Psalm 19:

“Let the words of my heart and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.”

You can tell that, after going to the Johnny Cash night at the Athletic Club, I went home and did a little bit of research. And when I saw the picture of his gravestone, looking back at me from the screen of my computer, with those words on it, I almost burst into tears. Isn't that how you feel when you know that you have been touched by a kindred spirit on the journey of faith?

There are times when I wonder where this country is going. Underneath the surface appearance of prosperity, there is a lot of disillusionment, uncertainty and suffering. And Lent is not a time to pretend that none of it is real. It's a time for us to remind ourselves that it is there and that we can address it with grace. Johnny Cash reminded himself and us of this by wearing black.

But it was also a great joy to be surprised out of the blue on a cold night at the Athletic Club, and embraced by a fellow family member, who walked the same journey you and I are walking today, and to feel the love of God shine through in the words of his songs. Thanks John R. Cash. I'm sure we would have our disagreements and that you disappoint me in some ways. But your struggles were worth it, and your faith matters to people like me.

And maybe my faith, our faith, as flawed and frail as we may feel ourselves to be, will one day matter to someone further down the road. It may matter to someone we have never met and that is something worth cherishing and upholding.

