

Sermon for Pentecost 9c
Proper 14c
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Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church
Los Alamos, New Mexico
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Genesis 15:1-6
Psalm 33:12-22
Hebrews 11:1-3,8-16
Luke 12:32-40

Yesterday was the Feast of the Transfiguration. The day when Jesus took Peter and James and John up to the Holy Mountain, and they saw their master transformed into a blinding light.

Today we read from the Genesis story of the God's promise to an old man who yearns for a son.

“Look toward heaven and count the stars – so shall your descendants be.” And he believed the Lord, and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

In the beginning of the Church when the followers of Jesus were Jews and bound by the Law, Paul uses this event from Genesis to argue at the first church council in Jerusalem that the Gentiles did not have to be circumcised and become Jews to follow Jesus.

Why? Because Abram is declared righteous in the covenant with God that promises that he will be the father of nations.

This happens before the covenant of the circumcision that gave him the name Abraham, and made him the father of the Hebrew peoples.

Jesus took Peter and James and John up the Holy Mountain so they could see with their own eyes what took place. They were embodied witnesses.

In 2 Peter it says: “I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to refresh your memory ... we have been eyewitnesses to his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Abraham “believed” the New Revised Standard Version, the NRSV, reads. And the other disciples believed what Peter and James and John told them.

I think a better translation is that Abram “trusted” the Lord, as the disciples “trusted” what they were told by the witnesses.

For me, belief suggests acceptance based on some sort of proof. There is no proof with trust; there is only faith.

So it was with Abram. He had faith and he trusted God.
It was Abram's faith that God reckoned as righteousness.

So what is righteousness?

A lot of ministers I've heard, talk about righteousness as being right, being good, doing the right thing, defying worldly conventions, being other-worldly, not caring about status or possessions, depriving yourself and your family in anticipation of a greater reward in heaven.

I don't buy any of that.

Righteousness, in my opinion has to do with being in right relationship with God.

The stories pile one on another in the Hebrew Scriptures that kings and peoples fail and are conquered because they relied on themselves rather than trusting in God.

Abram exercised his faith, and God reckoned it as righteousness.

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen," as it says in the reading from Hebrews.

The Letter to the Hebrews is probably the most theological of the epistles in the New Testament.

There we find the argument for Jesus as the Christ, the great high priest, the divine messenger who reconciles the world to God, and promises a return of the Son of Man, reflecting the promise of the Gospels.

Scholars believe the Letter to the Hebrews may have been written as early as 60 A.D., which would put it before the writing of the Gospels.

Mark is considered the earliest of the Gospels, and scholars speculate Mark was written sometime between 65 and 75 A.D.

No one's sure who wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews, but it is generally accepted that it was not written by Paul.

There are theories that the author was Barnabas, who traveled with Paul; or Apollos, one of the preachers mentioned by Paul; or by Priscilla, one of the early female stalwarts of the Way in the church of Corinth.

Whoever wrote the epistle, in this section, the righteousness of the forebears of the children of Israel is held up by citing example after example of those who did things for God without evidence or cause, and appeared foolish in the eyes of the world, only to be redeemed by the Lord God.

They, men and women alike, trusted in the Lord,
and had faith that God would not disappoint them.
And they were given a new homeland, the Kingdom of God.

That Kingdom is what Jesus promises to his disciples.
“Do not be afraid, little flock,
for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

So why does Jesus need to reassure the disciples that things are going to work out for the best? Don’t worry, You are getting the kingdom.

Well for one thing, Luke has just presented a diatribe by Jesus against the man that the little headline notations call the “rich fool,” which we heard extolled by Mother Lynn Finnegan in last week’s sermon. I commend it to you.

This man was preoccupied with his own life that he obviously ignored the needs of those around him, and he ignored his relationship with God.

Here he had plenty in time of need and he did not share with those around him who were starving. So he decided he had enough to start his own private bank with his personal savings account that would take care of him and his own.

So he is being called to account for his life,
and it will not be pretty in the heavenly court.

And just before the today’s reading, Jesus has told the disciples that they worry too much about their own well being and not enough about others.

Consider the lilies of the field. They neither sow nor reap, but not even Solomon in all his glory held a candle to the beauty of nature.

But here today Jesus reassures his followers that they are secure in the next life, but he does not exempt them from needing to work for the good of the many.
He assures them of a heavenly reward but they are bound to work for others.

In other words, do good works: feed the poor,
comfort the sorrowful, visit the prisoner, heal the sick,
care for the widows and orphans, embrace the disenfranchised.

Create by your works the kingdom here and now
as you wait for the kingdom that is being prepared for you.

“Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven.” ...
“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

There’s a great story in the non-Canonical “Acts of Thomas,”
not to be confused with the Acts of the Apostles.

Thomas the Apostle, forever known as Doubting Thomas,
goes to India to spread the Gospel.
He is hired as a carpenter by the maharaja there after demonstrating his skills in building,
and is commissioned to build a palace in the maharaja’s vacation land.

Thomas goes and finds great need among the people for healing and for feeding. He
spends the money the maharaja sends to care for the poor, to house the homeless, and
feed the hungry.

When the maharaja asks, Thomas sends word that he has only the roof to finish. The
maharaja sends his senior warden to check. When the warden returns, he reports that not
one stone has been placed on another.

The maharaja rages and has Thomas and his associates thrown in the dungeon while he
ponders what kind of death would be adequate to punish this deceit.

Thomas reassures his followers to trust in God and the Lord Jesus.

The maharaja, in the meantime, is concerned because his brother is sick unto death. He
goes to see him but is too late and he must mourn his brother.

The brother’s soul arrives in heaven, the angels give him a tour.

The brother is amazed by one truly spectacular mansion. And he inquires whether he
might be able to live in even the smallest room in this magnificent palace.

The angels tell him that he cannot, because the palace is being built by Thomas for his
brother the maharaja.

The brother begs that he might return to earth to convince his brother to sell him the
heavenly palace, and they grant his wish.

As the servants are dressing the body, the soul returns,
the body awakes, and the man calls for his brother.

The maharaja runs to his brother’s bedside.

The brother tells of the angels, and beseeches his brother to sell him his palace at any price. The maharaja ponders what his brother says, and decides he will keep his heavenly palace,
and summons Thomas.

Thomas is asked by the maharaja to build a heavenly palace for his brother, and the two provide support for Thomas' mission among the poor of India.

It's not Gospel, but it's a great story, and it resonates with the Gospel today:

"Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven." ...
"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

We are called to help build that Palace in Heaven, and to make this world a little more like the Kingdom that we are promised.

"Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

Amen.