



Texts in Context

Faith in the Old Testament: Pentateuch and Prophets for Pentecost

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THERE IS AN EBB AND FLOW TO THE LIFE OF FAITH. THE GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IS rekindled within us, and our faith is warm. As the day progresses we forget, and the flame flickers. God sometimes allows days to increase, and we find ourselves wondering whether what scripture says is true. Time for the fire to begin anew.

The Series C texts before us, readings from the Pentateuch and the prophets for Pentecost 6-17 (texts from Ecclesiastes and Proverbs, Pentecost 9 and 13, are omitted), present both faith and questioning, glorious certainty and cantankerous doubt. These were people like us—people of faith in need of faith, people of God in need of God.

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (July 12, 1998): Deuteronomy 30:9-14

Working from that brilliantly reconstructed history of Israel and Israel's writings called historical criticism, modern readers of the Bible understand Deuteronomy, presented for good reasons as the last words of Moses, to be the expres-

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Ten Old Testament lessons from the Pentateuch and the prophets for mid-Pentecost witness to Israel's faith and questioning, to glorious certainty and cantankerous doubt.

sions of a post-Mosaic reformation. The prophets, those electrically charged voices of alarm, were the first to notice: "We have broken our covenant with Yahweh; surely He will punish." Prophets are idea people, priests are leg men. Deuteronomy was written by Levitical priests in the northern kingdom after the preaching of Amos and Hosea.

Deuteronomy cries out: "We have strayed far. The Shepherd is about to use his rod. Turn back, Israel. We can turn back, surely! God's commands are not too hard. He is not asking for the moon. His commands are do-able. His word is near. You can taste it in your mouth. You can feel his easy commandments in your heart."

When faith falters, selfishness enters in. As we forget our Maker, we become convinced we must make it on our own, forgetting others, remembering our needs alone. Deuteronomy pleads for us to renew our love for God.

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (July 19, 1998): Genesis 18:1-10a

To hear this text properly, we need to include verse 12: "And Sarah laughed." This is not the laughter of faith, it is the laughter of unbelief, the laughter of the skeptic.

Skepticism looks only at the facts. She and Abraham are old. Period. He is ninety-nine and she eighty-nine. It has been years since she stopped menstruating. These were the facts.

Skepticism leads to cynicism. But both skepticism and cynicism need promises about which to be skeptical and cynical. Elderly couples are not skeptical about their ability to conceive. They simply accept the fact, with some relief. But Abraham and Sarah were not your ordinary elderly couple. They were unique. They had heard the voice of God offering to bless them with fertility. Years later they were not skeptical of their ability to procreate; they knew they were well beyond the years. They were skeptical of God's renewed promise.

The Lord had appeared to Abraham and Sarah in the form of three men. Abraham did the right thing. He welcomed them for a meal. One of the men said, "Your wife Sarah shall have a son."

That was too much for Sarah. She laughed. The laugh of unbelief is a sad, cynical laugh. The laughter of belief is joyful and confident.

No matter. In a year Sarah conceived and bore a son. Her cynical laughter turned to the laughter of faith. God's promises are true whether we believe them or not. If we believe them we rejoice now. If we do not, our only comfort is the laughter of cynicism, a cynicism that can eventually give way to true joy, unless of course we harden our hearts beyond earshot of grace.

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost (July 26, 1998): Genesis 18:20-32

Our next text follows hard upon the previous one. I take it that Sarah laughed both for herself and Abraham. The text does not say Abraham joined her in her laugh. Nor does it deny it. Abraham shared Sarah's weary cynicism. He, too, had waited long and vainly for God's promise to be realized. He, too, had been

ready to substitute his servant (Gen 15:3) as Sarah had been ready to have a child by the maid (Genesis 16).

God's renewed promise is followed by the most intimate and detailed dialogue between a personal God and a man recorded in scripture: the famous "50-45-40-30-20-10" conversation. Abraham was able to reduce the requisite number of righteous six times, from fifty to ten. "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it."

After God renews a promise, prayer life improves. Abraham, having no scriptures, had to wait for God's repeated appearances. No need to envy Abraham his multiple spiritual experiences; we have scripture recounting the experiences of others. As we read, contemplate them, and make them our own, we warm and rekindle our hearts, according to his command in 2 Tim 1:6. We open the channel for God to get through to us.

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost (August 9, 1998): Genesis 15:1-6

According to critical scholars, this text comes to us from the anonymous hands of the Elohist tradition, that torso of the Pentateuch which eschews the anthropomorphism of the Yahwist and has God communicating by visions rather than by direct personal conversation.

"Do not be afraid, Abram." (That is what E is always wondering about: who is afraid of God and who is not.) Faith is always preceded by fear. No fear no faith. "We should fear and love God," Luther dings into our ears in his *Small Catechism*. As he put it in *The Bondage of the Will*, "those...who have not experienced the office of the law, and neither recognize sin nor feel death, have no use for the mercy promised by that word" (LW 33:138).

Visions frighten. When God comes in, it is fearful. Abram needed to hear the words: "Do not be afraid." His fears calmed, he is emboldened to bring up the promise: "You have promised me many descendants. I don't even have one." That is one thing prayer does: remind God of his promises. Of course it is we who need to be reminded, but we are not praying to ourselves or reminding ourselves of promises made by us to ourselves. We are reminding God of what he has promised us: (a) to hear us and (b) to give us what we ask, especially himself in the form of his Holy Spirit.

Abram cannot resist answering his own prayer: "My slave is to be my heir?" God does not need suggestions as to how his good and gracious will is to be carried out. He is bemused by them, permits them as a doting parent, but does not need them. God always has something better in mind than our suggestions. "No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:9).

God does not politely bypass Abram's suggestion; he flatly overrules it: "This man shall not be your heir." It sounds like Jesus rebuffing the Syrophenian woman: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (Mark 7:27). When God demurs and denies our prayers, it is only and always because he has something much better in mind.

Then God takes Abram out of the narrow confines of a man-made tent into the fabulous outdoors made by God himself. "Look at the stars. Count them, if you can." Everybody needs a text. We cannot remain with the mystical, as foundational as that may be. The raw presence of God must have a name, an identity. Our mind wants to get in on the revelation that vouchsafes our spirits. We are not spirits but flesh and blood and mind. We need to understand. How can we tell others of the God who has met us unless we have words, mind's food? But Abram had no text. He had heard about, though never read, the old texts that told about the gods, but none of them would have fully prepared him to meet the true God. So God used the only text available: nature, the starry skies above. God still uses nature to point to himself and his promises; it's just that now, thanks to Abraham and his descendants, we have a plethora of texts for our spiritually hungry minds to feed on.

"So shall your descendants be" — that is, innumerable. Abram juxtaposed the reality of his childlessness with the promise of God and chose God's word over the facts of fourteen words in English, five in Hebrew, and with these five words, David-like, we can slay our Goliath, the evil one. We would be righteous, we would be right with God and right with people; we would see God, we would have peace in every pore. All we have to do is the greatest, most difficult, yet at the same time the easiest of acts: believe the LORD, believe his word, trust him.

Paul made these five Hebrew words the foundation of his entire theology, giving it prime position in his weightiest letters (they are all weighty) in Romans 4 and Galatians 3. All depends on faith, everything in life is built on belief. From a joyful faith (there is no other kind) in a redeeming God come all those words that please him. Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin (Rom 14:23). Abraham read it in the stars. We can too, but now we have the story of his faith and we don't have even to go outside (though we may if we wish). Armed with the faith delivered on the wings of the word, we can see God in every star and in every grain of sand.

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost (August 16, 1998): Jeremiah 23:23-29

The prophets know how far away God is. They have learned this because he visited them. Here is the paradox taught on every page of the Bible: those who know that God is near know with equal certainty that God is at the same time far away. God is both inexpressibly transcendent and unspeakably immanent. Those who know God best know this best about God. The Bible is a record of people's experiences of God. Those who have experienced God make this plain: the nearer God comes, the farther away that near and immanent God seems.

God gives experiences of himself. With these experiences comes knowledge of God. Faith is what remains after the experience fades. Faith based on this knowledge nurtures and sustains in the time between experiences. Religious knowledge, the remembered and documented repository of experience with God, by itself does not save. Faith saves. Religious knowledge can save only if it interacts with a lively faith and trust.

In our text, Jeremiah, a man granted an experience of God, is pitted against fake prophets who have religious knowledge but no experience of God. The religious types were saying, "God is near. He is our God. We are comfortable with Yahweh. He has elected us. We cannot fail." They knew God by hearsay. They knew him from the tradition. And the tradition, as they understood it, said God would always protect them, no matter what. Jeremiah—and all the prophets, all who had met him, seen him, experienced him—knew differently. "Am I a God nearby and not a God far off?"

Traditional faith is a fuzzy faith. It knows of God, but the knowledge is dimmed and frayed by time. In a time of fuzzy faith, false prophets arise. The people are gullible and they will be willingly misled.

Jeremiah spoke more sharply and more clearly of God. God's word is not a slow warm fire in the fireplace, able to warm and cook food. God's word is a consuming fire able to burn anything combustible. God's word is not a gentle knocking at the door. It is a rock-shattering hammer blow. When faith fades and hearts grow hard and callousness takes over, God in his mercy sends prophets.

We live in such a time. We always live in such a time. Who is willing to meet God so that God's people may experience him?

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (August 23, 1998): Isaiah 58:9b-14

If modern scholars are right, Isaiah 56-66 comes from various voices in Judah after the return from Babylonian exile. It was a time of confused seeking. The people of God had suffered a nation-ending and religion-ending blow. Israel in 587 B.C. had lost its capital, its temple, and its independence.

A pagan religion might have adjusted to reality and traded in its god for a more successful, stronger, more reliable god. But Israel's was not a false religion. It was built upon the knowledge of the true God. So Israel rose from its ashes. Dazed voices asked, "Where is Yahweh now?" The voice of prophecy was slowly dying out, but it was not yet dead. Third Isaiah offers us many words of lively hope.

Our text renews the foundation of religion: prayer. When all else fails, those who are living and who still believe can pray. "Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am."

There do come those brief and fearful times when God does not receive prayer. When God is about to do his quick work of destruction—only and always to prepare for the new work he intends—nothing, not even his people's prayers, avails. Three times God told Jeremiah not to pray (Jer 7:16; 11:14; 14:11). There were no prayers while Jesus was in the grave. But mercifully, as John 16 teaches, the "no-prayers-now" times are always momentary. The larger truth is stated by our text: pray and God will answer.

But the faith required to sustain a prayer life does, will, and must translate into obedience to the God who hears prayer. "If...then; if...then; if...then." These are the refrains in our text. Grace is not conditional, but the growth in grace comes only from obedience. If you obey, then you will grow. Both the obedience and the growth come from God and they are the stuff of eternity.

Faith obeys.

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (September 6, 1998): Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Deuteronomy teaches that repentance is not only needed, but that turning again to God is a matter of life and death. Deuteronomy calls for a decision: "If you obey, blessings; if you disobey, curses and death."

Faith needs always to be awakened. New fuel is continually needed to feed the furnace of faith. Faith can flicker and go out. The prophets sensed this was happening. Deuteronomy programs a solution. "Turn, repent, live."

Israel did not. Israel died as an independent nation. The failure of the deuteronomic reform to rouse the people to repentance and to restore an obedient faith to Israel points to the only real solution: God himself must become a faithful Israelite who can show Israel the way back to God.

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (September 13, 1998): Exodus 32:7-14

Genesis 12-50 is the story of a family and how individual members in it fluctuated in their faith. Exodus tells how that family became a nation and how that nation as a group did (or did not) show faith. The wilderness narratives in Exodus and Numbers are a thousand miles from spiritual jingoism; no chest thumping here. Rather these stories disarm one with their constant confession, "We were unfaithful."

Our text gives us the heart of the golden calf episode. No sooner had people experienced the exodus, no sooner had Moses gone up the mountain for further instruction, than they forgot, lost faith in the unseen God, and called for something they could see: the image of a calf. Unbelief is impatient and foolish. Faith is patient and wise.

The historical probabilities behind these events may be debated. What is not debatable is the theological accuracy and spiritual profundity invested in the story. Sin is deep, ever-present, and quick acting. This Exodus text reaffirms the observations of Genesis. The first couple disobeyed and sinned. The first family produced a homicide. The covenanted nation zestily breaks the first commandment.

These rehearsals of sudden sinning are instructive. They are both frightening and strangely comforting. First, we learn we are not alone in sin. Second, we have here the roots of the teaching of original sin. It started immediately. It was deep and severe.

The world continually tries to forget this truth. But those who will not learn from scripture must face the judgment of the living God. One estimate of the number of civilians killed in wars from 1900-1987 is 170 million—in addition to the 34 million soldiers. The blood of Abel is still crying out. There is only one cure for the sin that faithlessness produces: confession.

God was ready to destroy Israel and begin again with Moses. God can do things like that. That is the lesson of the flood story and the new start with Noah. But Moses is more righteous even than Noah. Noah was able to save only himself and his family. Moses, showing greater faith, implores God to change his mind.

Moses is a type of Christ par excellence. Forgetting himself, he exercises his faith on behalf of God's people. Jesus does this with even greater effectiveness.

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (September 20, 1998): Amos 8:4-7

"When will the holidays be over so that we can get back to business?"

When faith in a providing God fails, greed takes over. Amos is the first prophet whose sermons were recorded. He was taken by the Lord to tell the Northern Kingdom that their time was short: the Lord was about to let the Assyrians destroy them.

The Lord's plan to bless the world through Israel was failing. Israel should have known better. Yahweh had distributed the land to them equally, but now they were parceling it out among the wealthy. The poor were being sold into slavery. Business practices were sharp and dishonest.

Faith leads to obedience, but Israel was no longer obeying the terms of the covenant with Yahweh. Disobedience is the symptom; the illness is faithlessness.

Amos, in the service of his God, proclaimed: "I, the Lord, will never forget any of their deeds." He who has the power to cast sin behind his back (Isa 38:17) will not do so in face of brazen unbelief. Forget God and God remembers your sin. Remember God and God forgets your sin.

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (September 27, 1998): Amos 6:1a, 4-7

Moses arrested Israel's doom. The prophets could not. They prayed for Israel and were heard, at least initially. Amos twice prayed successfully on Israel's behalf (Amos 7:1-6), but finally God overruled him (see Amos 7:7-9; 8:1-4, where Amos records no objections to God's decrees of judgment).

Israel's lack of faith led, as it must, to a false security. They were comfortable in the twin capitals of Jerusalem and Samaria, but their ease was built on the *dis-*ease of others. They were clever and enterprising and had made it to the top in the economic heap, but they were "not grieved over the ruin of Joseph."

Their faith in Yahweh had dimmed. Gone was their commitment to him who owned all things and who had given them their land. Gone was their belief that they were called to be a unique nation. Unlike others, who were dedicated to the principle of power, they were to be Yahweh's own people, dedicated to a love of him and to a care for each other. But they had abandoned their call. Therefore, severe loss, death, or exile was to be their lot. ⊕