

The Friend at Midnight

Time after Pentecost
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, July 29, 2007
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Genesis 18:20-32; Colossians 2:6-15, (16-19); Luke 11:1-13

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Celebrity photographer Annie Leibovitz spent time with Queen Elizabeth II of England last March—the Queen sat for four portraits. Things did not go smoothly for Leibovitz, who had the audacity to suggest that the queen’s ceremonial robes and crown did not work well together for one of the portraits, and that the crown should be removed. Well, the Queen gave her an icy stare, refused to go along with Leibovitz’ request, and walked away in a huff.

Was the photographer just a little too forward and brazen? Apparently so. Which brings up the matter of Abraham in our Old Testament lesson this morning. Doesn’t Abraham, as he wheels and deals with the Lord God here, seem a bit forward? Is this courage to admire, or is Abraham simply foolhardy and brazen? Why, Abraham acts as if he has a relationship with the Lord God here that permits such conversation! Remember, this is the lowly human creature, associating with the creator of the universe, and Abraham makes it look as if he’s calling the shots?

This is an ancient story of the sinfulness of the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah, and God’s righteous anger and determination to punish the sinners. Previous verses show us that the people of those cities are indeed wicked, and God’s commandments are clear. Destruction of the cities and their inhabitants is the just response from a God of justice.

Then along comes Abraham, who negotiates a deal with the Lord God in order to save Sodom and Gomorrah, for the sake of the righteous ones in those cities. Abraham wedges himself in between God and God’s plan of punishment, getting very close to God, looking him in the face, as it were, and saying, “If there are 50 righteous folk in Sodom and Gomorrah, would you still sweep away the city! Would you not forgive them for the sake of the 50?”

But does Abraham have any right to act in this manner? Is he not taking liberties like Leibovitz did with the Queen? Isn’t there a protocol here, some etiquette involved when conversing with the divine, just as there is when conversing with British royalty?

Shouldn’t there be some kind of angel, a customer service representative of sorts who takes Abraham’s request and sends it up the chain of command? How can Abraham be so bold, so cocky, so persistent, and why doesn’t the Lord God give him an icy stare and walk away in a huff, like Queen Elizabeth II did with the photographer?

Reading the news story of Leibovitz’ experience with the Queen reminded me of a video clip from years ago when a British commoner threw her arms around the monarch, the Queen looking rather stiff and uncomfortable. The reporter admonished the person, “Don’t touch the Queen.”

So apparently that's the essence of a commoner's relationship with the Queen. There is a boundary one cannot, must not cross, for to cross it would somehow sully Her Majesty, make her common by contact with the commoner.

It is only a superficial relationship, then, that a person can have with the Queen. There is no opportunity for a deep or close relationship, when such boundaries are intact. Don't touch the Queen!

Is that the admonishment we should give Abraham here? That there is a boundary one cannot, must not cross in our dealings with the Lord God? That to attempt to cross it might somehow sully the Almighty God; make God common by contact with a commoner?

Well, too late. Abraham crosses the boundary line. Yet not out of cockiness or any inflated sense of self-importance. He's not being uppity with God here. Abraham is indeed already in a relationship with God, the one who created him. It's not a superficial relationship, but rather, God has created the possibility of a lasting and deeply intimate relationship. For God has chosen Abraham. This God has made promises to Abraham that not only affect his future, but proclaim his future, and God has even offered his continual presence to Abraham on his life's journey. See, prior to this section of scripture, the Lord God reiterates his plan to give Abraham and his wife Sarah a child, a son to continue their family line, and that line will be filled with descendants who will become a mighty nation declaring aloud its God. That nation will lead others to the same lasting, deeply intimate relationship with God—and it will be a relationship based on mutual faithfulness, on justice, compassion, love and right living.

Because Abraham's relationship with God is not superficial, Abraham can be so bold as to suggest to the Lord a different outcome for Sodom and Gomorrah—an alternative to simple mass destruction and blind retribution—a different way for the Lord to uphold righteousness. Abraham suggests that God does not need to be the moral scorekeeper for the world—you know, creatures sin, Creator ejects them from the game. Abraham is confident enough, secure enough, trusting enough in this relationship he has with God that he goes and suggests an alternative way of being God.

To Abraham, a just God, a holy God cannot at the same time be a tyrant God, an unreasonable God. Yes, Abraham believes and trusts in a God who acts decisively in his children's lives, but not because of who they are and whatever they have done. Rather, it is a God who acts decisively because that is God's nature. And God's nature in action is both just and compassionate. So the story ends with the Lord God agreeing to Abraham's suggestion that, if there be 10 righteous folk in those cities, Sodom and Gomorrah will not be destroyed.

It may be, as Paul Harvey says, you know the "rest of the story." Or maybe not. The wickedness of the people in those towns is so terrible that the Lord God decides to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah anyway. Apparently there weren't even 10 righteous folks there. You might just suppose that God never really listened to Abraham, that Abraham's words were a phenomenal waste of breath. Not true! Abraham's words to the God he trusted made a difference. If you go to the 19th chapter, verse 29, you'll read this: "*And the Lord God remembered Abraham . . .*" Sodom and Gomorrah were punished, but in his remembering

Abraham, God sent angels to warn Abraham's brother, Lot, and his family, so they could flee to safety.

Relationships, deep relationships, involve such critical remembering of the other, don't they? Abraham remembers God and God's promises. God remembers Abraham and his prayers and pleas. Abraham has "touched the Queen" and it has made a difference. Their relationship, both remembered and ongoing, brings about the possibility of redemption, of life, of a future in which to hope.

Now, what in the world does this verbal exchange between Abraham and God have to do with us? Well, we learn from this story our God hears the people he has formed and to whom he has given breath. God has great might and power, yet he is not unyielding or uncaring. He is ruler over all the earth, yet he is not capricious or impulsive in his judgments. God listens to his people and considers and deliberates with his holy mind and heart.

Which ultimately means you and I, beloved children chosen by God, remembered by God, can, in great confidence, **talk** with God. Prayer is not some wasted effort of breath, a monologue on our part, but always a grace-filled dialogue. We could thank Abraham, whose confidence in this relationship created the possibility of an alternative way for God to be God. Or we could simply thank God, whose alternative way of being God is most clearly seen, not in this Old Testament story, but in the New Testament, in the sending of his Son Jesus to earth. Jesus, born of a carpenter and his young Jewish wife, born to be a commoner among commoners, reaching out to us. You see, God is not sullied by living with his people—rather, when he deigns to come to earth to us, we are thereby drawn into the gracious and good life of God and his kingdom. Jesus entered our world, not in order to hang out with the righteous and consider himself above it all, but in order to touch, heal, forgive, and transform you and me. Jesus is the alternative way for God to be God—holy and good and perfectly loving us. When we see Jesus, we know that the Lord God did indeed remember Abraham . . . and us.

This Jesus is so patient in our Gospel lesson, isn't he? His disciples, this hapless band of followers with their immature faith, their selfishness, worries and anxieties (gee, they sound like us, huh?), asked their teacher Jesus how they might talk with God. So he encouraged them by saying, "When you pray, do it like this: 'Daddy in heaven, holy is your name . . .'" Jesus reminds them here, by using that word for Daddy (*Abba*) that their relationship with God the Father is intended to be so deep and so intimate that they can use just such an affectionate name when addressing God. Jesus Christ, in teaching us about prayer, shows us what Abraham knew centuries earlier—that we can dare to touch the Queen. We can talk with God and God will listen. And when we pray we are offering ourselves to God, along with our words.

Now, I know someone will tell me they have prayed, but the conversation has been noticeably one-sided. Oh, it's true—maybe you have experienced it—that your prayers sometimes appear to go unanswered. But I tell you, Jesus assures his disciples that, in that prayer we offer, God will respond. He is, says Jesus, the friend at midnight who will answer our pounding on the door.

So, Jesus gives us advice on prayer. Jesus tells the disciples they should be persistent. A persistence not unlike Abraham's. *"Ask and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you."* In other words, be bold, brazen, a little forward. Just keep the conversation going. Writer Max Lucado says much the same thing about prayer. He wrote: *Pray. Don't prepare to pray. Just pray. Don't read about prayer. Just pray. Don't attend a lecture on prayer or engage in discussion about prayer. Just pray. Posture, tone and place are personal matters. Select the form that works for you. But don't think about it too much. Don't be so concerned about wrapping the gift that you never give it.*

And even when our anguished cries may seem unintelligible and falling on deaf ears, when our problems seem so profound as to render our situation hopeless, Jesus says that actually the contrary is true—God is the One who knows what we really need, and he will provide. For he has chosen to enter our common life. He has chosen to build a deep relationship with each of us. Trust he will always respond in the fullness of his love. **AMEN.**