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Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18
“Between Our Faith and Doubt”

Author and theologian C.S. Lewis gets a lot of acclaim for his Chronicles of Narnia, but he is also the author of a lesser-known but just as masterfully written book called *The Screwtape Letters*. The book is a collection of letters written from a master devil, Screwtape, to his nephew, Wormwood. Wormwood is a young devil-in-training, and he is collecting tips from his uncle about how to lead humanity away from God.

An important lesson in devilry lies in the “Law of Undulations.” Screwtape writes:

My dear Wormwood, so you “have great hopes that the patient’s religious phase is dying away,” have you? I always thought the “Training College” had gone to pieces since they put old Slubgob at the head of it, and now I am sure. Has no one ever told you about the law of Undulation?

Humans are amphibians – half spirit and half animal...As spirits they belong to the eternal world but as animals they inhabit time. This means that while their spirit can be directed to an eternal object, their bodies, passions, and imaginations are in continual change, for to be in time means to change. Their nearest approach to constancy, therefore, is undulation – the repeated return to a level from which they repeatedly fall back, a series of troughs and peaks....As long as he lives on earth, periods of emotional and bodily richness and liveliness will alternate with periods of numbness and poverty...a natural phenomenon which will do us no good unless you make a good use of it.¹

Screwtape teaches his nephew that it is natural for a human’s life to be filled with ups and downs. Though humanity can be thrown off track by their – our – expectations, God can and does work within these peaks and valleys to conform humankind into God’s image, deepening their faithfulness. This “woo”-ing God calls and works in the lives of God’s beloved in the troughs and the peaks of life, and everywhere in between!

We can relate to this concept of the law of undulations. Day-to-day life is full of good times and bad: births and deaths; tragedy and triumph; trials and celebrations. Those of us who watched Olympic coverage in the past weeks saw how tragedy and triumph were closely linked for Joannie Rochette, the Canadian figure-skater who won the silver medal only days after her mother’s sudden death. But while the pendulum of our days seemingly swings between extremes, ***we spend most of our days somewhere in between.*** We get up on the wrong side of the bed, but a good cup of coffee quietly sipped at the kitchen table soothes our spirit. We are stressed over mounting winter utility bills and the ever-lengthening to-do list on our desk at work – but a hug from our child or grandchild puts the important things in life into perspective.

As we turn to the story of Father Abraham, we encounter a man who knows something about the law of undulations. He has experienced many peaks and troughs in the 3 chapters of back-story we have so far: he’s seen abundance and famine; the mundane and the exciting. He’s experienced fear-filled resignation and triumphant victory. He has even experienced the zeal of exuberant faith, and the shame of troubled doubt.

The great patriarch Abraham was not immune to life’s struggles, to the ups and downs of human existence. Abraham, like Wormwood’s patient, has directed his energies toward the Divine just as he has likewise experienced the pangs of a life caught in the limited net of linear time.

¹ Ibid pg. 36-37.

See, Abraham has received a promise from God – a promise that he would be a great nation, blessed by God and through whom God’s blessing would be made known. In faith, Abraham left all he knew in pursuit of this promise. He followed God’s call with a zeal unlike that of most others. And his faithfulness throughout his whole story in Genesis tells of a faith rivals that of all others in scripture – a faith so deep that he was even willing to sacrifice his own son.

But if we take a closer look at the entirety of Abraham’s story, we see that the tribulations of life often pull Abraham from the peak of faith and called forth troughs of doubt. His life was not spent on the mountaintop – in fact, there were times when he feared that the promise would not come to fruition or when he thought that God couldn’t take care of things on God’s own. Set alongside this demonstration of great faith are demonstrations of great doubt: Abraham’s actions in Egypt; Abraham’s lying with Hagar. Abraham’s life, too, is filled with the strokes of a pendulum swinging between the extremes of faith and doubt.

Our passage for today shares with us an intimate dialogue between an Abraham who, like us, wants to trust, and a God who wants to be trusted. Abraham is engaged in the daily life of the ordinary, between the extremes of faith and doubt. He has heard, clearly, God’s promise of an heir, but that promise has not come to fruition. God shows up in a vision to Abraham, reiterating the promise spoken before. God reminds Abraham of the plans that God has in mind and of the future that God has in store.

But Abraham has not seen evidence of the fulfillment of a promise. The heir he is expecting hasn’t been conceived, and as Abraham faces the reality of his own age and his certain mortality, he wonders how God will produce this promised heir. And so he, quite plainly, asks God about it. “Am I missing something, God,” he asks. “There is no heir – Eleazar of Damascus, one of my slaves, is the one who will inherit all that I have, all that you have given to me. All this blessing will go to a stranger; my house won’t be blessed; my family line won’t continue. Is *this* what you had in mind?”

God refocuses Abram on the promise. An *heir of his own* will be born – and his descendants will be as countless as the stars. God has not forgotten Abraham, or the promise he made to him. God is still faithful; God’s promise will be fulfilled – but in **God’s time, not Abraham’s time**. And so to *prove* that God’s word is true, God offers Abraham another sign of the covenant – the sacrifice of the meat and the sign of the smoking cauldron is, as commentators note, a ritual of covenant in ancient times: a sign that Abraham would understand – a *contract* ensuring that promises would be fulfilled.

See, Abraham in our text is in an in-between place. He knows that God has promised good to him. He knows that God is trustworthy, that God is loving and righteous in every way. He believes that God is *God* – **faithful, merciful, powerful, and good**. Yet as Abraham waits, his confidence wanes. He second-guesses. He wonders if the promise is still on the table, if there is something he needs to be doing differently to cash in on the deal, or if God had forgotten about him altogether.

Like Abram, while our lives have their ups and downs, we too live most of our days in the space between our faith and our doubt. This is the space in which we *know what is possible with God*, and we trust that the possible *can* and *will* happen – but we can’t tell just *when*, and we aren’t sure what *we* must do to move things along! **We trust that God is a God of love, and we even trust in the promise of the resurrection: that life can come from death and that sins can be forgiven.** But we struggle to see how these promises play out in our day-to-day lives. We live in the place between the reality of what is and the reality of what will be.

We trust that the God of peace will bring the war in Iraq to an end, but we wonder when and how as war wages on into its 7th year. We trust that the God of wholeness will heal a child battling an addiction, but we wonder when and how as the child's body and mind are ravaged by drugs. We trust that the economic slump will end, and that new jobs will emerge for the unemployed, but we wonder when and how as recession lingers for so many months in a row... We know that God will comfort us as we grieve the loss of a loved one and that the rawness of pain will subside, but we wonder when and how as we go through our first year alone.

Even when life takes on a positive note, the wait can be wearing as we cling to the hope: that a positive future lies ahead if we persevere through a rigorous academic program, that our children will lead successful lives if we provide enough nurture and opportunity; that good health lies ahead at the completion of a medical treatment plan or even a weight-loss regimen. Waiting is hard. Clinging to hope as we live through the discipline of the day-to-day is not always easy, especially when we become (sometimes painfully) aware that we do not yet have that which we have been promised, that for which we yearn. As Walter Brueggemann writes:

The problem of faith is waiting, even when the delay seems unending....In the Promethean way we have of immediately making our own future, we are not accustomed to waiting. In our impatience we are prone to conclude that if it is not given now, it will not be given. Abraham's impatience (vv. 2-3) reflects the same judgment. But gifts may not be forced. Futures stay in the hand of the God who gives them.²

This in-between place can be difficult, strenuous even. We, like Abraham, may ask of God: "How am I to know that I will possess it? How can I be sure, God, that you will keep your promises? How can I be sure that goodness will come out of this trial? How can I be sure that this struggle, too, shall pass and that your redemptive purpose will be made known?" We too struggle in this space of waiting – even when faith is on the line.

When we find ourselves lingering in that place between faith and doubt, we are invited to cling to the knowledge that **God is faithful, still**. See, while we may say we long to demonstrate an Abraham-like faith, a part of us is really longing for is an opportunity to see *God's faithfulness* at work. We hunger for the ability to embrace the assurance that God is who God says God is, for if we know God's promises to be true then we, like Abraham, can press on.

As we delve deeper into this Lenten season, we may find those waiting pains surfacing. We may more candidly acknowledge the in-between-state of our hearts and our lives as we wait for peace, for healing, for strength for ourselves and for others. We may have a day where our faith soars, and we may have a day where our faith feels like it is buried in the snow-pile at the edge of the sidewalk. **But know that the God of Abraham is our God too. And the in-between-time of Lent will give way to a celebration of the fullness of God's faithfulness breaking into history in Christ who put on flesh that we might know God's love, experience God's forgiveness, and see God's kingdom breaking into the world here and now.**

Thanks be to God.

² Brueggemann, Walter, *Genesis: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982. p. 149.