

# Abraham pioneers trust in God

**T**RUST IS THE VIRTUE we hate to love. When you're in a trusting relationship, it's the most wonderful thing in the world. But when trust breaks, nothing hurts more. We vow we'll never trust again; the pain of disappointment obscures the worth of trust. If you suffer betrayal you look on those who trust with a mixture of cynicism and jealousy. You predict the same pain will come to them, but you wish you could know again the exhilaration they now have. We hate to love trust, but we admire those who have it.

Each year the second Sunday of Lent extols the one person in the Bible whose trust excelled the rest: Abraham. God called him from his homeland (modern day Iraq) and led him to a promised land (modern day Israel), where the two established a covenant and Abraham proved his trust in God by preparing to sacrifice his son Isaac (Genesis 12 through 22). The second Sunday of Lent proclaims the call of Abraham in year A (Genesis 12:1-4a), the testing of Abraham in year B (Genesis 22:1-2, 9, 10-13, 15-18), and his covenant with God in the current year, C (Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18).

**D**ID ABRAHAM really exist, or was he a legendary figure like Adam and Eve? Scholars are divided. Some say his entrance in Chapter 12 of Genesis introduces the first truly historical human being in the Bible. Others say his name, which means "father of a multitude" suggests that he is a legendary figure around whom some educative stories have been attached. If he is historical, his life can be situated around the year 1800 BC. Three major religions trace their ancestry to Abraham: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. He is called "ancestor of a multitude of nations" (Gen 17:5) and "friend" of God (2 Chronicles 20:7).

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The covenant we hear about next Sunday was hardly a contract of equal parties, yet it tells us a great deal about them both.

God held all the cards. God, being all-powerful, never had to come to terms with anyone. But God

loved the people he created, and offered a relationship with them.

What did God get out of the deal? It depends on which covenant you read. In the agreement with Moses (Exodus 19-24), several hundred years after Abraham, God expected ancient Israel to fulfill the terms of the covenant, including the famous Ten Commandments. But the agreement with Abraham, like the one which would come much later with David (2 Samuel 7 and Psalm 89), and the interior one so lovingly described in Jeremiah (31:27-37), carried no conditions. *No conditions.* God just said, "Here's what I'll do for you."

Nonetheless, God got something out of the deal which pleased him enormously. He got Abraham's trust. When Paul praised Abraham, he lauded his faith, not his actions (Romans 4:3; Galatians 3:6). After all, the Genesis covenant wasn't asking for actions; still, Abraham supplied it with faith.

So the covenant tells us something about both partners: the love of God and the trust of Abraham.

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**G**OD PROMISED two benefits for Abraham: His descendants would number as the stars in a Hubble sky, and he would take possession of the Promised Land. Blood and earth. Time and place. The two promises expressed both the dominion and the favor of God.

The reading next Sunday combines the promise and the ritual. After laying out the vision, God ritualizes this covenant with Abraham. The patriarch slices in half a symbolic menagerie, chases away the annoying birds of prey, and watches God move between the carcass halves. Imagine the two partners saying, "If I break this covenant, may I be split in two as well." Wondrously, incomprehensibly, God actively accepts these terms.

Each year on week two of Lent, Abraham prepares the way for us to hear the Gospel story of the Transfiguration. Both images offer hope. The Transfiguration shows us the future glory which awaits Christ and those who follow him. Abraham shows the changing course of history. He appeared after the discouraging conclusion to the story of Adam and Eve. Just when the reader thinks all is lost, in comes Abraham, and we discover that all is found. He pioneers a trust in God, whose merciful covenant gives hope to a world stunted by disillusion and cynicism. □

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