

Homily: Proper 14, 2025

Year C

Genesis 15:1-6

Fr. Robert J. Gaestel

Hebrews 11:1-16

St. Luke 12:32-40

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Many, many years ago when my son was in elementary school, I took him with me to the place where I made my Annual Long Retreat. Following the practice of the Jesuits, once a year I would make a retreat of 8 days. For about 12 years I made my retreat at the Camaldolese Hermitage located on the Pacific Coast Highway just south of Big Sur. It overlooked the ocean; it was absolutely quiet—the silence was deafening—and at night all the stars capable of being seen with the naked eye could be seen with absolute clarity. So, one time I took my son there for us to spend a few days together. Coming out of the chapel one night and seeing all the stars he asked me about what we heard in today's Old Testament. "How can there be descendants as many as the stars of heaven, or the innumerable grains of sand upon the seashore?" Almost without thinking I said, "In the Bible, the promises God makes are infinitely greater than the words we have to describe them."

Last week, reflecting on the Parable of the Rich Fool, we asked, what made the rich fool a fool? What made the rich fool a fool was his failure to ask, "what are my choices?" And having identified these, to further ask, "then what?" Well today, if it is really true that God's promises are infinitely greater than the words we have to describe them, what are my choices? One choice is to go around in circles, going nowhere fast until you stop spinning. The other choice is to go somewhere, but oh so slowly, seeing and greeting it from afar. And making a choice, then what? What are my choices? There is a choice for the human as human which is the impossibility of numbering the stars or the grains of sand upon the seashore and just stopping with this. If that is my choice, well, then what? There is also a choice for what is beyond the human that is for the human; a promise infinitely greater than the words we have to describe it. If that is my choice, then what? What are my choices? Abraham believed the Lord and he reckoned it to him as righteousness." What are my choices? One choice is the predictable, the measurable, the repetitive; and the other choice is the unpredictable, the immeasurable, the incomprehensible, and always ever new.

Today's reading from Hebrews speak of faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." When most people hear the word "faith," they gravitate to the second half of the sentence, "the conviction of things not seen." In other words, someone like me stands in a pulpit. Inside the pulpit hidden from the congregation, there is an object. The preacher says, "I have this thing," let's say a Styrofoam cup. I even bring it out so you can see it. I say that it contains wine, borrowing from the Wedding at Cana, "the good wine kept until now." I describe its color, its aroma, its taste. I tell you all about it in exquisite detail. But you don't get to see, smell, or taste it. All you can do is believe what I say about it, or not believe what I say about it, or take no position one way or the other.

In a movie from a long time ago, Robert Duvall playing a detective tells his brother Robert DeNiro playing a priest, "I don't know about the Holy Ghost for a fact. But you are in the Holy Ghost business. So, you tell me about the Holy Ghost and I believe you." Those of you who grew up watching *Rocky and Bullwinkle* will remember Bullwinkle saying to Rocky, "Hey Rocky, watch me pull a rabbit out of my hat." Rocky says, "again?" Bullwinkle says, "Nothing up my sleeve, presto!" He pulls out everything and anything but.

In other words, the promise never comes true, but as they say, “Hope springs eternal.” Unless you happen to be King Solomon writing his book Ecclesiastes in which besides saying “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity,” which we heard him say last week, he also says several times over, “What has been is what will be. What has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, this is new? It has been already in ages before us.” Combining Bullwinkle and his hat out which no rabbit is ever pulled, and King Solomon who says, “All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; all things are full of weariness,” means that in the end, everything is predictable in the sense that everything turns out to be less than what was desired.

And yet, “therefore from one man, and he as good as dead were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and the innumerable grains of sand upon the seashore. These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar.”

Having seen and greeted what, exactly? They didn’t see and greet anything at all. At its core, faith is not about “some thing.” At its core, faith is only about “with whom.” Genesis makes it clear, “Abraham believed God.” It doesn’t say “Abraham believed in God.” It doesn’t say “Abraham believed what God said.” It doesn’t say Abraham believed anything, or believed in anything. It simply says, “Abraham believed God.

What does this mean? In his book The Gifts of the Jews, historian Thomas Cahill says that whenever we hear something advertised as “new and improved,” we have the Jews to thank for this. King Solomon says there is nothing new under the sun. What there is, is what there will be. Whatever is claimed to be new has already been. The only reason for thinking that something is new is because human beings always forget. King Solomon puts it this way, “There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to happen among those who come after.” And, truth be told, human beings like it that way.

Recently *Wall Street Journal* columnist Holman Jenkins writing about Artificial Intelligence and all the exalted claims made about it, said the whole thing is misnamed. It really should be called a “probability engine.” The output is an exercise of weighing the probability of a particular word following on the one that preceded it. Sigmund Freud might have called it, “an electronic repetition compulsion.” “There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to happen among those who come after.” Human beings like it this way. There are several new books out describing recent developments in cosmology. It seems like the theory of the Big Bang is now obsolete. This is Big Bang as the origin of what is from a single event. The scientists would prefer something repetitive, fluctuating, multiple universes spawning other multiple universes ad infinitum. Anything at all but the first three words of Genesis, and the first three words of St. John’s Gospel: “In the beginning God,” and “In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God, and the word was God.”

Why do human beings like it this way? A long time ago, I had six years of Jungian Psychoanalysis. In those days, the health insurance was very generous. I once asked my analyst about a choice I had made. It was not a choice of “some thing,” but a choice about “with whom,” the “with whom” being me, and the choice that would determine my life’s future. I asked “why did I choose as I did?” He said to me, “There is no such thing as an antecedent cause for a completely free choice.” It simply is. A free choice is a free choice. Yet, in that moment of choosing, I was aware that the one choosing while certainly me, was also not just me, but more than me.

It boils down to something we hear in Church week after week. Today we heard, “Fear not Abraham, I am your shield. Your reward will be very great.” In the Sunday lectionary these words come up once every three years. Every Sunday though, these words God once said to Abraham, God says repeatedly to us about us. “Holy and gracious Father, in your infinite love you made us for yourself.” Why? “Because, as the Jesuit priest who was once my Spiritual Director said, “he thought you might enjoy it.”

At the Annunciation, the angel Gabriel answering the Virgin Mary’s question, “How shall this be?” said, “With God, nothing will be impossible.” He’s not talking about pigs flying. He is talking about God negating negation. In other words, with God there is no such thing as no. As St. Paul will say to the Corinthians about Christ, “in him it is always yes, for all the promises of God find there yes in him.” Or, “Abraham believed God, and he reckoned it to him as righteousness.”

So, what is faith really? As I said to my son, “God’s promise are infinitely greater than the words we use to describe them.” Faith is not an unthinking leap into the dark. Faith is the opening of the mind to the insight that God’s revelation in Christ provides the unifying pattern of the totality of human experience. God’s revelation in Christ is the only thing that does justice to all we know or ever will know. Consequently, it rings true because God’s revelation in Christ dilates us into an expanded vision, holding together thought and feeling without losing our embrace of the objective world. In other words, faith is not about some thing. Faith is about “with whom,” so that faith pulls everything together so as to make perfect sense.

And what are we to do? In the Gospel, Jesus speaks of going about our lives in a state of readiness for what is eternally new. In the movie *Band of Brothers*, in the night before D Day in Europe, a young paratrooper landing behind enemy lines in the dark and separated from his unit froze and hid until dawn. He met an officer and confessed what he thought was his cowardice. The officer said, cowardice was not your problem. You just don’t realize that you’re already dead.”

In their own ways, both today’s Epistle and Gospel make the same point. Speaking of faith as “assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen, is not about what could be or what might be, but maybe in the end, won’t be; it’s about what absolutely will be, but is not yet. It is so absolutely will be, that one now lives as though it already is. It is not if, but only when, and so much so that in a most real sense, it is here and now.

What the commanding officer says is true about combat, Christianity says is true about life in faith. “For you have died and your life is hid with Christ in God. In other words, from today’s Old Testament, Epistle, and Gospel, Abraham believed God and God reckoned it to him as righteousness because the “with whom” who is beyond the human is for the human totally.