

STANDING ON THE PROMISES OF GOD

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In the *United Church Observer* magazine some years ago there was a cartoon depicting two young people talking. The caption read, "What are you going to be *if* you grow up?"

The cartoon illustrated an article on the attitudes of young people entitled "Growing up fearing war". In that article it was reported that survey after survey taken throughout the developed world indicate that young people were afraid of the future. The future held no promise for them. They had no promises to stand on.

Today's existential threats are different, but the same feelings of pessimism are shared by many young people.¹

On the other end of the spectrum gradually as we grow older, we come to the end of many things. We can't run as fast. We will never be as great a success we imagined we would be, or at least could, with fame and fortune, great accomplishments lauded by all. The fulfilment of our dreams is no longer possible. We are grown up now.

Perhaps we grow up too fast, and that's a shame because when we grow up most of us lose some, if not all, of our capacity to imagine and dream and to see promise in the future. Adults deal so much in ideas and thoughts, rather than in visions and imagination. We perceive things as they are, rather than as they could become. Adults deal in probabilities; children revel in possibilities.

Just watch children at play. Children see faces in clouds, jungles in backyards. Dogs become horses and a cardboard box a chariot, then a spaceship, then a submarine all in the course of an afternoon. Without imagination the world is black and white and monotonous. Children, and adults who manage to hang on to their imagination and creativity, see the world in technicolour and hear it in stereo hi-fi. They perceive not just the secular, material

world around them, but also the colourful, wonderful and hopeful world of promises, promises to stand on, promises to build upon.

What do you think of the imaginings of children? Are they just illusions in the present or are children building the future? Ask a child what they are going to be when they grow up. Suppose they said they were going to be Prime Minister. Would you believe it? I'm told that both Lester Pearson and John Diefenbaker imagined as children that one day they would be Prime Minister. Both of them hoped and believed and worked to make it true. And it became true. Now it is history.

The faith of adults is too often the faith of the mind, assent to correct beliefs. The faith of children, the faith which inherits the Kingdom of Heaven, is the faith of trust, the faith of the heart, the faith of the imagination, the faith which asks why not and dreams that it might be so.

If you had such a faith what would your future hold? If you had a faith as to move mountains, what mountains would you move? What possibilities lurk around the corner? Is your future full of promise? Do you still imagine what might be and ask why not? Do you dream and hope and imagine as children do? As we all once did? Or have we so grown up that there are no more possibilities, no more dreams, no more promises, no more hope?

In Genesis 12 we hear the beginning of a story of hope. It is not a story of mere human dreaming and optimism, but of divine promises and hope inspiring a vision of what might be, of what can be, of what will be. It is the story of Abram and his wife Sarai. Abram was descended from Shem, one of the three sons of Noah. Abram and Sarai had no children. He was 75 and she 65. They lived in the land of his family and his forbears. He was at the point in his life when dreams are ended and what is left is a time of relaxing and retiring and ending. But for Abram and Sarai life wasn't over yet. Its possibilities weren't closed yet. God was not finished with them yet. God called them with a promise. God called them to leave the security and safety and comfort of their ancestral home, and to trust God. God gave them promises, absurd promises beyond human imagining, that God would lead them to a new land, a Promised Land, where their barrenness would be overcome, where God's creativity would abound and they would produce a great nation. And through

them blessings would spread out to others. Abram and Sarai were asked to have the faith of a child, to trust God, to stand on the promises of God.

What an absurd promise God spoke into Abram and Sarai's barrenness! What a fantastic dream beyond what any child could imagine! What God promised was obviously not even in the realm of possibility, much less the realm of probability. Abram was after all 75 years old and being asked to leave everything behind, everything he had built, everything he had worked for, everything dear to him, for what? For a dream? God didn't even bother to tell Abram where he was going. He was only told to leave. And what about Sarai? Surely it was beyond belief to believe that an old woman, postmenopausal, was going to bear children? This is fantastic, an impossible dream, lunacy.

Isn't that how most of us feel when we catch a glimpse of something God might, just might, want us to do? Don't we often, too often, feel inadequate not just for what are called to do, but even for what we are doing right now?

At a meeting once I conversed with two other ministers about our backgrounds. One was educated in zoology, another in nuclear engineering and myself in physics and mathematics. What an unlikely lot we were for ministry. We had none of the skills one would expect were necessary for ministry. I, for example, didn't play a musical instrument, or even read music. I had no experience with young people or with children. I had no idea how the Church beyond the local level worked. I had never heard of the Presbytery, or Conference or General Council, much less know what they did. I was for all practical purposes Biblically naïve and theologically ignorant. Who was I to be called into ministry? If I had known in advance I would have prepared better. I would have at least taken some of the right undergraduate courses to get ready. You know what my biggest worry was? Preaching and speaking in public. It terrified me, but it was part of the calling.

That's the story I have heard over and over again from those in ministry. We felt unprepared for the call. We don't want to sound like we are bragging, but when God decides, God provides. That's just the way it is.

“Humanly speaking,” Mother Teresa once said, “[our success] is impossible, out of the question. Because none of us has got the experience. None of us has got the things that the world looks for. This is the miracle of all those little Sisters around the world. God is using them – they are just little instruments in [God’s] hands. But they have their conviction.”² They stand on the promises of God.

Abram and Sarai had their conviction. So what did they do when God called them? “Abram [and Sarai] went, as the Lord had told [them].” Why? For one, and only one, reason, because God is God. As Paul said, “Abraham believed God.”³ Abram and Sarai stood on the promises of God.

When we look back at Abraham, we see the Father of the Hebrew people, the Father of faith, the Father of the Church. But from Abram’s time, looking forward it was sheer folly, this journey upon which they embarked. Nonetheless, they stood upon the promises of God and stepped forward in trusting faith. This was the first step in making the future happen.

What happened then? It certainly wasn’t an easy journey. And the faith of Abram and Sarai certainly wasn’t steadfast. Three times Abram lied to protect Sarai, saying that she was his sister.⁴ In reality it was to protect his own skin. Another time under Sarai’s instigation Abram fathered his first child, Ishmael, by an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar.⁵ But all this did not dissuade God. It did not change God’s mind. God made the promise to Abram and Sarai again. And you know what this trusting Abraham did? He laughed.⁶ Later on when God made the promise again and Sarah heard it, she laughed too. But the promise stood. God remained faithful. God kept giving signs that God was always one step ahead of them.

On the journey Abraham had no road map, no preannounced destinations. These were all in the mind of God. Abraham was totally dependent on God. There was no “flight plan”, no itinerary and no routing. All there was, was God. God reiterating over and over again God’s promise and providing signs along the way.

How perceptive are we at seeing the signs of God’s leading? How persistent are we in looking for the signs? Do we even bother? Usually when a Church is trying to decide on a direction

for its future it asks the question "What can we do?" which usually means, "Can we afford it?" The real question, however, is "What does God want us to do? What path does God want us to follow?" The money part isn't relevant. If God decides that is the way, God provides. If God decides that it is not the way, no amount of money is enough.

An acquaintance of mine, who was not a particularly religious person, was asked to go to Calcutta to take photographs of Mother Teresa and the Sisters of Charity for book being written about her.⁷ One of the sisters told her the story of their need for a new building. One day two of the sisters felt led to go out to find this new place. As they walked along the road a man stopped his car and asked them where they were going. They told him. He asked them to get in his car and proceeded to take them to a building he owned, a building, which he then offered to them as a gift.

When Mother Teresa was asked about where the money comes from for the expensive projects she said, "I never think of it. It always comes. The Lord sends it. We do [God's] work; [God] provides the means. If [God] does not give us the means, that shows [God] does not want the work. So why worry?"⁸ They stand on the promises of God and God points the way.

And the way toward which God points is the way of blessing, both of ourselves and our lives, and of the whole world. Abram and Sarai, the Scriptures say, went to Canaan and dwelt among the Canaanites.⁹ Likewise we dwell among those who are not of our community and our faith. But we are called to live among them as those who stand on the promises of God confident that the blessing of God will be lived out through us into others. And so we erect our altars to God, as Abraham did, to call on God's name, to praise God and to petition God, but most importantly to declare that we have no other god than the One who makes promises and keeps them. That God has our heart. That God can be trusted. That God we do trust. We stand on the promises of God. May we have the ears to hear the call, the eyes to see the vision of promise and the heart to act with courage and a trusting faith. Come, let us stand on the promises of God. Amen.

- ¹ https://thehub.ca/2022-08-10/young-canadians-are-pessimistic-conservatives-have-different-ideas-about-what-to-do-about-it/?utm_source=The%20Hub&utm_campaign=b8a5f26f53-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2022_08_09_05_52&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_429d51ea5d-b8a5f26f53-532476675&mc_cid=b8a5f26f53&mc_eid=ff858236bb
- ² Diane Forrest, *The Adventurers*, Wood Lake Press, 1983, p. 124.
- ³ Romans 4: 3.
- ⁴ Genesis 12: 10-20; 26: 1-11.
- ⁵ Genesis 16: 1-16.
- ⁶ Genesis 17: 17.
- ⁷ Donna Moyseuik, photographer for Sr. Sue Mosteller, *My Brother, My Sister*, Griffin Press, 1974.
- ⁸ Diane Forrest, *The Adventurers*, Wood Lake Press, 1983, p. 124.
- ⁹ Genesis 12: 5-7.