

From the Pulpit

Excerpts from messages being presented at area places of worship this weekend.

The Rev. Larry Harrold, Center Baptist Church

The Bible is full of promises God made to His people. Some were made to specific persons, or applied to a specific time, and others are generic for all believers of all times. But they all have one common element: They depend on God for their fulfillment; not only in the fact that He will always keep His promises, but also in the fact that He will keep those promises His way. From the time God first spoke His promises to Abraham, to make a great nation from him, and to bless all the nations through his seed (which we later learn means the Messiah Jesus), it is clear that the promise depends entirely on God's power and plan. God said, "I will" do these things. God said, "I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the Earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:2-3) He didn't tell Abraham at first how this would come about. That information wasn't as important at the time as the simple fact of Who would do it. The rest, as we say, was "just details."



Harrold

But Abraham and Sarah were people like us. When the promise didn't seem to be coming to fulfillment after a while, they got their own ideas of how it might happen. Abraham said to God, "Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir." (Genesis 15:3) To which God said, "This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir." (Genesis 15:4) Sarah then came up with a solution of her own. She said to Abraham, "Now behold, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Please go in to my maid; perhaps I will obtain children through her." (Genesis 16:2) But again, that wasn't God's plan. He said to Abraham, "Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac." (Genesis 17:19) What Abraham and Sarah proposed weren't "bad ideas"; both were very normal for their culture at the time. But they were both human solutions for a divine promise. They were "possible" solutions for a seemingly "impossible" problem. But God seems to delight in doing what is impossible to us, so we will have no doubt about the most important part of His promises, the "Who", not the "how". That's really what faith is all about, isn't it? Not just trusting God for what makes no sense to us, but for what seems entirely out of our reach and ability to foresee. He's the "God of the impossible!"

Rabbi Mordechai Levin, Beth El Synagogue

In questionable situations, we would all like others to give us the benefit of the doubt; however, we sometimes find it difficult to do the same for them. If someone fails to show up for an appointment, we assume she just did not care. But perhaps her absence was caused by a serious situation that called for her immediate attention. In another example, a person may say something that turns out to be hurtful, and we assume he said it on purpose. But perhaps he wasn't aware that his words were hurtful, or he simply — and unintentionally — had his facts wrong. Because we can never be aware of all the circumstances in other people's lives, our assumptions about their actions may sometimes be way off the mark. Obviously, there are times when people are irresponsible, insensitive,



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hateful, or they intend to be hurtful with their words or actions. But those are not the situations which I'm referring to here; I'm talking about circumstances in which there are no ill intentions, and yet we misinterpret others' words or actions. If somebody disappoints us, we would be wise to avoid automatically jumping to a negative conclusion regarding that person's motivation. Maybe his words were quoted out of context, or maybe we do not know the whole story. Judaism teaches us to avoid jumping to negative conclusions. For instance, we read in the Hebrew Bible (Leviticus 19:15): "with justice you shall judge your neighbor." The Mishna (beginning of the third century) advises us: "Do not judge your fellow human being till you stand in his situation"; and "Judge every person favorably." We all want others to give us the benefit of the doubt. Don't you think we should do the same for them?

Nancy Tomlinson, St. Paul United Methodist Church, Papillion

In the Scripture this week (Mark 10:17-22), a wealthy young man runs up to Jesus, kneels at his feet and asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" We can infer this is a passionate, young man of great faith. We find he has kept all the religious commandments since his childhood. He truly wants to know what more he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus tells him he must divest himself of his wealth (to the benefit of the poor) and follow after Jesus. The "follow me" is spoken to numerous persons in Mark but only this wealthy young man is told to free himself of his wealth before he can follow Jesus. What is our faith worth to us? If we had to divest ourselves of our worldly goods to follow our faith fully, would we be able to do so? What if we were asked to leave lucrative employment, break an unhealthy relationship, or work on overcoming a comfortable addiction (perhaps one to stuff)? What decision would we make and what value does that reveal that we place upon our faith? What is our faith worth to us?



Tomlinson

The Rev. Scott McNeill, Second Unitarian Church of Omaha

The story of Job teaches us at a core level that suffering will happen, regardless of the work we put in or the praise we give the Holy. The test of humanity, as we have seen in Tucson, Millard South and throughout the world, is not how we respond to life when we are blessed, but how we respond when everyone, God included, seems to have abandoned us. Job's commitment is to be commended, his faith to be followed — but can his life be imitated? How can we, as members of a free faith who use reason and experience to connect to the Holy, how can we take the story of Job for our own life? We teach our children that life is not easy or fair — and yet hope to find some simplicity or justice in our own lives. The answer is not resignation or despair but rather hope. Cornel West paraphrases the Scripture of Hebrews when he talks about hope being that which you have no evidence of, hope is for things unseen. Justice in this world is all too often something unseen and hoped for. And yet together with the help of others, we can use our own power, our own agency to create a better life for ourselves and for others. As we have sung, "There is more hope somewhere." Job knew it. Those affected by tragedy and hard lives know it. And may we know it, deep in our hearts.



McNeill