

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
8/8/2010, The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost  
Genesis 15:1-6, Hebrews 11:1-16, Luke 12:32-40  
Yearning for Better Days

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

My aim in this sermon is to invite us to find encouragement in Jesus so that we do not rest content with this present world, but instead hope for better days. Some folks settle for *what is*. I want us to yearn for what *ought to be*. Aye, and by “better days,” I mean the days that Jesus believes in and is working toward and means for us to work toward too.

My main text this morning is from our First Lesson, our reading about Abraham from Genesis 15. But I want to lift up a lovely line from our Second Lesson as a moving commentary on the whole Abraham story. That line is from Hebrews 11. It goes this way:

<sup>10</sup>For [Abraham] looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. (Hebrews 11:10, NRSV)

Now, that sounds like a good city to me -- one whose architect and build *is God!* This world has known many excellent architects, but none of them are so fine as the Lord.

Abraham yearned for a city with “foundations,” which is a good thing for a city to have, or for any of us to have. It puts me in mind of the saying of our Lord about building on rock, not on sand:

<sup>24</sup>Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock:

<sup>25</sup>And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock.

<sup>26</sup>And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: <sup>27</sup>And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it. (Matt 7:24-27, KJV)

Abraham built his house on rock. I want to be like that man!

How did Abraham gain such praise? Well, Abraham did many good and holy things over the course of his life. In recent Sundays, we have been reading about some of his good deeds, including these: He left his homeland, in extraordinary obedience to the Lord, and headed for a strange land, a land he knew not, but only that the Lord was leading him there. He dealt graciously with his nephew Lot, who

preferred the rich pasture land, and left Abraham to fend for himself with the leftovers. And he interceded for that wicked town Sodom.

But Holy Scripture does not praise him for any of these good deeds, but rather for what could be called “the set of his soul.” For the great thing about Abraham is that he was willing, as it were, to step off a cliff and to fling himself into the arms of the Lord.

<sup>6</sup>And [Abram] believed the LORD; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness. (Genesis 15:6, RSV)

Now, you might think that is a dangerous way of life, stepping off a cliff into the arms of the Lord. Abraham would disagree. For him, the safest way of life is to trust the Lord. And so it is that Abraham sought a city that has *foundations*.

Today’s story about Eliezer of Damascus illustrates Abraham’s faith. We do not know much about that man, Eliezer.<sup>1</sup> He comes from Damascus, which is Syria, and as far as I can recall, Abraham never lived in Syria. So, Eliezer would be a foreigner to him. He seems to have been a steward or manager of the household. If so, we do not know whether he was just or unjust, kind or cruel, a good steward or a wastrel. All we know is at the start of our reading, Abraham is downhearted. The Lord has promised him a son, but Abraham and Sarah have grown old waiting for that promised son, and now plain reason compels him to conclude that his inheritance shall go to his steward or some other worker in his household, but not to his son, for he has no son. That is simply *how things are*.

That’s how we find Abraham at the start of the story. But at the end of the story, we find him believing the words of the Lord, straining ahead *for what has been promised*. The Lord brings him outside and bids him number the stars:

<sup>5</sup>And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” (Genesis 15:5, RSV)

And Abraham *believed* the Lord! That’s what made Abraham righteous in the judgment of the Lord. Abraham believed the word of the Lord. He did not believe simply with his mind, but also with his heart and with the conduct of his life henceforth. To use the words of the great Bible scholar Gerhard von Rad, Abraham took the Lord’s promise “seriously and adjusted to it.”<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Some commentators believe that the underlying Hebrew text has been so lost and muddled that even his name is uncertain. In fact, the *New Jerusalem Bible* simply omits the reference to Eliezer. Still, the main point is the same: Abram is discouraged and reason compels him to conclude that his inheritance shall go, not to a son, but to a non-relative.

<sup>2</sup> “God has indicated his plan for history, namely, to make of Abraham a great people; Abraham ‘has firmly assented’ to that, i.e., he took it seriously and adjusted to it. In so doing he adopted, according to God’s judgment, the only correct relationship to God.” (Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (The Westminster Press: Philadelphia, 1972) pg. 185)

And so it is that Abraham set his soul heavenward. His faith included *faithfulness*, which does not mean that he was perfect, but simply that he tried to set his life in proper order, yearning ahead for better days, getting ready for them, seeking that city which has foundations, “whose architect and builder is God.” His faith made him righteous. He set aside what his eyes could see in favor of a better world that he could not yet see, but which had been promised to him by God.

It was if that nighttime conversation with the Lord gave Abraham a second wind. He gazed up at those innumerable stars, credited the Lord with truthfulness when he spoke of having that many descendents, and never looked backwards from then on. Abraham was a man who did not settle down with *what is*, but kept alive his hopes for what the Lord says *shall be*.

Such is the will of the Lord for us. Our Maker seems unwilling that we should give up our hopes and dreams. He is unwilling that we should capitulate to what is, but rather should live for what ought to be and what *will be* if Jesus has anything to do with it. And Jesus does have much to do with it. In fact, he has everything to do with it!

Nothing seems to have angered the Lord so much as Israel’s murmuring about “the good old days.” They spoke of how miserable they were in their desert journey toward the Promised Land. They even said that they wished they had died back in the land of Egypt (Number 14:2). This willingness to give up on the Promised Land so troubled the Lord that he resolved to be done with those people:

<sup>11</sup>And the LORD said to Moses, “How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs which I have wrought among them? <sup>12</sup>I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they.” (Numbers 14:11-12, RSV)

Glad to say, Moses interceded for the people and God was merciful to them, but the lesson is clear: when the Lord calls you to the Promised Land, do not settle for Egypt.

Some of this world’s greatest saints and most practical workers are simply people who yearn for better days and a better world.

To take a romantic example, Carol and I were recently charmed by the Broadway musical *West Side Story*<sup>3</sup>. Especially the duet “Somewhere,” sung by Tony and Maria, expresses a yearning for better days, for the kind of world Jesus believes in:

There’s a time for us,  
Some day a time for us,  
Time together with time to spare,  
Time to look, time to care,

---

<sup>3</sup> *West Side Story*: Music by Leonard Bernstein; lyrics by Stephen Sondheim

Someday!  
Somewhere  
We'll find a new way of living,  
We'll find a way of forgiving  
Somewhere.

They went ahead and acted on their yearning for better days. They set aside existing divisions and went ahead with their hopes for a new way of living, a new way of forgiving.

Likewise with a heartbreaking example from this week's newspaper about the medical aid workers killed in Afghanistan<sup>4</sup>. They were ten people dedicated to a ministry of compassion. Seven men and three women, returning home from a three-week trek on foot to deliver free medical care to the remotest regions of the country. "They were on an optometric expedition, running an eye camp."

People suffer all over the world. People have trouble seeing all over the world. But these ten folks yearned for better days, for a world in which the lives of at least some people were made better. Their work could well put us in mind of the work of Jesus himself:

<sup>4</sup>And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see:  
<sup>5</sup>*the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.*(Matthew 11:4-5, RSV)

Our faith follows the faith of Abraham, so that both Israel and the Church seek that city "with foundations." And so, when Israel imagines the fulfillment of her yearning, she pictures those days for which she has been waiting. It is not simply that better days come, but that Israel knows herself to be waiting for them:

<sup>7</sup>And [the Lord GOD] will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the veil that is spread over all nations.  
<sup>8</sup>He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from off all faces; and the rebuke of his people shall he take away from off all the earth: for the LORD hath spoken it. <sup>9</sup>And it shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God; *we have waited for him*, and he will save us: this is the LORD; we have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation. (Isa 25:7-9, KJV)

The faith of the Church has the same optimism. And so, we have St. Paul's great line about his yearning for better days:

...but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and

---

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/08/world/asia/08afghan.html?\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/08/world/asia/08afghan.html?_r=2)

reaching forth unto those things which are before, <sup>14</sup>I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.  
(Philippians 3:13-14, KJV)

Now we turn to our Gospel story and to you and me. Jesus has promised to come again to this old world of ours. The question for us is whether we will be found ready for him:

<sup>37</sup>Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes; truly, I say to you, he will gird himself and have them sit at table, and he will come and serve them. <sup>38</sup>If he comes in the second watch, or in the third, and finds them so, blessed are those servants!  
<sup>39</sup>But know this, that if the householder had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have left his house to be broken into.  
<sup>40</sup>You also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an unexpected hour.” (Luke 12:37-40, RSV)

The Jesus for whom we wait is one who believed noble and hopeful things for humanity. He did not shy away from sinners, but seemed to see through their sin to a kind of underlying dignity in them. Indeed, it was such a remarkable thing about Jesus that his opponents complained that he was a “friend of sinners.”

This Jesus believed in the profound health of the coming Kingdom, in which the blind would see and the lame leap for joy, that he went ahead and healed people then and there, on the spot, because he lived so heavenward.

People whose minds and spirits were confused or possessed did not trouble Jesus. He simply healed them.

Lepers were not unwelcome to him.

Jesus was Abraham to the nth degree. He believed in heaven and treated people in a heavenly way. And now he is risen from the dead to make sure heaven itself comes to our earth.

Will we be ready when he comes? Will we be found building on a rock, and not sand. We will be found seeking a city with foundations, or just one more form of a dream world?

There is an awful lot of sorrow out there. There are an awful lot of people who need some word of encouragement. They need to know that better days are coming. By your baptism, you are authorized to tell them to keep their hopes up. Jesus is risen, and so better days are coming. Bring discouraged people to church. Introduce them to Jesus. Give them some practical reason for hope. Give them something to aim for, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.