

**Sermon, 8 June 2008—Proper 5**

Genesis 12:1-9; Psalm 33; Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

Abram is called the father of believers. The three monotheistic religions that spread from the Eastern edge of the Mediterranean Basin—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—all claim him as their forbearer. He models for all three life by faith in the One God. He is the ancestral depiction of what it looks like to live out the conviction of God's reality and God's unity. In all his story, what is foremost is his responsiveness to God—a sensitive intuition, which all of us must develop, as if he were dowsing for water as he treks across a wilderness, which enables him to locate and float on the currents of God. The glorious passage we heard today is the beginning of Abraham's story, before God had given him the name Abraham, when he was still called Abram.

Abraham is the only one in Scripture called the “friend of God.” God made us for this friendship. God came to Eden in the cool of the day, to walk with Adam and Eve, but they preferred their own interests. No friendship survives that. So it is profoundly moving later in Genesis to find God walking again, this time towards Abraham's tent under the oaks of Mamre, and to watch Abraham reverse the perversity of Adam and run out to welcome God in for dinner. It is no small thing for Jesus to be welcomed in to dinner by Matthew and to recline next to tax collectors and sinners. When we recognize that Jesus is Immanuel, God-with-us, the complete meaning of that dinner opens out for us. Who can imagine God's gratitude at finding that what God had hoped for all along is finally happening: the chance to sit down together as friends! Who can imagine how deeply it offends God when the self-righteous protest over the company God keeps and draw up lists of whom God is allowed to take pleasure in! The oneness of God is known by the universality of God's love.

I am going to say two things about monotheism this morning, because monotheism is not as obvious as we like to pretend it is, nor is it as drab and dusty and abstract a theological construct as we hope to confine it to being.

First, true monotheism is to recognize that, wherever we are, we are in the presence of God; there are no other deities. You might feel we can all at least take *this* for granted; you might think it rather pedantic of me to state this. On the other hand, confining monotheism to this rather commonplace and obvious notion is the devil's grinning pastime. As the Letter of James puts it, "You say you believe in God? Good! The devils also believe—and they tremble." Don't trust your mind; don't get lost in whether or not you approve this or that doctrinal formula; don't worry about ostentatious religious pronouncements, yours or those of others. It is idle. It is self-deception. And because it is self-deception, it has nothing to do with the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Instead, scrutinize your behavior. True monotheism and polytheism can be distinguished as sets of committed behaviors. Your schedule will tell you how many gods you are trying to placate; your chequebook will tell you at how many altars you worship.

Functionally, all too often I slide back into living my life as a polytheist; perhaps you do as well. We have loyalties that shift according to our context. Our behavior indicates one allegiance on Sunday and another, even many others, on the other days of the week. Most of us do not, in fact, live our life as if we were in the constant presence of the One God; we forget God as easily as we forget items on a shopping list. We do not consider what makes our life ONE, what is ONE in our life, but instead, as we set up our routines, as we confirm our practices, as we install our habits, we see them as a jigsaw puzzle of demands. In the challenge of solving that puzzle—even of figuring out if all the pieces of our life are from the same puzzle—we assign God a time and a

place; and we do this so carelessly and easily and matter-of-factly that it is quite evident that we don't grasp that GOD IS THE ONENESS OF OUR LIFE. We don't trust that ONENESS at all, but enter into our life as a series of negotiations and competitions.

Abraham, however, knew that it did not matter where he went or where he pitched his camp for the night; wherever he was, he could set up an altar and invoke the Name of the LORD. To be a monotheist means that your primary relationship is with the One God. To be a monotheist means that your ongoing conversation throughout the day is with God. To be a monotheist means you spend your day practicing the presence of God, as Brother Lawrence put it, calling your mind back to the consciousness of God.

All other relationships are subsidiary. They are secondary, not because they are unimportant, but because they are held on loan from this One God and due back to this One God. I do not possess these various investments of mine, these calendared projects of mine, these structures of mine, as if they were something I could hold in addition to or in opposition to my religious interests. Instead, all of them are on lease; they belong to God. I pay for them with my blood and breath; I spend blood and breath to inhabit and use them; that is the medium of exchange that God has given to us when God gave us life. Whether I care for them or abuse them, maintain them or destroy them, is another matter—and I am accountable for what I do with what I have on loan from God when the One Owner of all things surveys what I have done with what was entrusted to me.

I do not care what you call this constant standard of accountability which looms over us all. If it makes you nervous to call it God, find another name. What matters is that you come to the awareness that every second of your life is seen as one life. This standard of accountability is indifferent to your intentions

and explanations and evasions; that is, it admits no other gods. All of us together stand before it as equals; that is, to love your neighbor is to love yourself. If you are a monotheist, then you understand that wherever you are and whoever you are, you as a person and all of us are under the same gaze. God is the One who sees all that is as one, one in accountability and one in value, because God is one, and desires us to be one, and by grace activates our oneness.

This is either very inconvenient or very comforting; only you know which it is for you. I know that the part of my mind that manages my life would rather be a polytheist: different little altars for different little projects that demand different little amounts of attention and energy, where I, only I, am the one who decides how much substance and how much time goes on each altar. Thank God, I am coming to know that this busy self-important little pagan that I act like I am is nothing more than some little puppet figure scrambling around pretending to be in charge. I keep trying to play solitaire; and God keeps dealing this game of poker in which the one-eyed King is the wild card.

So the second thing I want to say about monotheism has to do with this game of poker. The author of the Book of Genesis writes, “So Abram went, as the LORD had told him,” as if this were a simple easy thing—let alone that we are told that Abram was seventy-five years old at the time. Abram let go of what he knew and dropped into free-fall. Because he had the courage to do this, he became a blessing to all people. And Abram only had the courage to do this because he knew the ONENESS of God. He knew that wherever his wandering took him, he was no further away from God. He could not fall out of the world that God had made and over which God presides. As that profound exploration of Christian spirituality, Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings, puts it, “Not all who wander are lost.”

What Abram is going through is the humiliation and terror of starting over, of not knowing where he belongs, of moving out beyond his protective habits, of finding himself unable to state with certainty what is good and right and true for him. Zen Buddhists speak of beginner's mind, our utter openness to our state of unknowing, which is a breath away from enlightenment. The Tibetan Book of the Dead describes the moment of death as being the moment of full openness to the unoriginated dharmakaya, the luminous essence of emptiness, "unobstructed, sparkling, pure, and vibrant," which is our liberation. Our mind always reacts in panic to these moments and rushes in to cram them full of interpretations and fetishistic practices. At these moments, instead of returning to Ur, instead of clinging to his father's idols, in those empty spaces, we are told Abram set up altars and worshipped the unnamable and unknowable God who was calling him forward. He gave thanks to the source of his insecurity and uncertainty; he praised what had turned his life upside down. He knew he could never be lost to the One God, never wander beyond the reach of the One God, never slip beyond the grasp of that disturber of certainties, who calls into being what is out of what is not, and who raises to unheard of new life what had been sealed into the tomb as dead.

My dear sisters and brothers, this rawness never appeals to us, but somehow in retrospect we recognize its vitality. With God's grace, we can recognize that what feels like free-fall is life itself in the moment. For example, there is a way for some people that catastrophic illness can bring focus and purpose. I do not mean that manic ferocity of denial, which exhausts everyone around in its fatally flawed determination to outrun death. I mean the ability, when nothing more can be done, to find one's self simple and still. At those moments, the size of the crisis and the shape of one's consciousness seem exactly and surprisingly identical. We can be, at those moments, awake as

never before—and out of the edge of your eye, you can see Abram, standing next to you, having reached the crest of a hill he’s never climbed before, looking in wonder at a stretch of grassland which God has promised will be his.

In a significant way, this is—or could be—your story: ten years ago, as a congregation, you moved to a strange land, promised to you, so that you might become a blessing to all who know you, and set up an altar there. Perhaps we too quickly rush in to settle, to solidify, to rebuild what we recall from a previous home; it is a natural human instinct to mark one’s territory, to excavate and line one’s den, to establish familiar tracks through the thickets. But I say we do this perhaps too quickly, because our experience is that we get to know God in the free-fall, when we move out among strangers, when we know that the next step is right, even without knowing the map or the terrain.

Perhaps that is why the Gospel’s dangerous memory of Jesus, over and over, is of a man who dragged people from their jobs, who tore them from their families, who broke apart the bonds that held them in place, saying, “Follow me,” and who left them without visible means of support, to the outrage of everyone who found that Jesus exposed their piety as prudishness and their prudence as cowardice. To live as Jesus lived is sheer madness, unless you believe that God is real and that God is one. God is what turns free-fall into sky-diving; God is what turns uncertainty into faith. And may our faith be known in our life, so that all we do can be recognized as our ready response to the Eternal Source, the Only-begotten Word, and the Life-giving Spirit, one in power, wisdom, and love, and whom we praise today as the only God.