

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for Scout Sunday, February 14, 2010
Lessons: Genesis 15:7-12,17-18 and Mark 14:32-42

HOW AM I TO KNOW?

Scouts, suppose your patrol is hiking through a thickly wooded area and you want to check your direction. You know your destination lies south-south-east. How do you verify that you are hiking more or less in the right direction? Simple. One of you takes out his compass, aligns north to the needle pointing north and so can see which way is south-south-east. Now, suppose you have a skeptic in your patrol: a kid who questions everything and wants proof. “How do you know,” he asks, “that the needle in your compass is really pointing north?” Well, it is in fact pointing to the magnetic north pole, not the true geographical north pole, but you are so far south of both and they are so close together that the distinction makes no difference. But how do you verify that your compass is not defective? Again, simple. Four other guys take out their compasses, and their needles all point in the same direction as yours. What are the odds that all five compasses are defective in exactly the same way? But the skeptical boy persists, “How do we know there is not something nearby so strongly magnetic that it is “fooling” all our compasses by attracting the needles to itself?” You answer, “Just keep walking with us,” and off you go toward south-south-east until, sure enough, you arrive at your destination, which does pretty much prove your compasses guided you the right way, doesn’t it?

Suppose you got truly lost, with no compass, in deep woods on a cloudy night with no visible stars. Suddenly, a man who has seen your flashlights comes through the trees and says, “I know the way. Come with me.” Do you trust him? You will know he is for real when he has led you out of the woods. Until then, you can only trust him or not. The more you think you know the right way, the less likely you are to go with him in a different direction.

Life is more difficult to guide for yourself than a hike through the woods. Life comes with nothing so simple and verifiable as a compass. Some people would disagree, saying, “Life does come with a compass: the Bible.” Have you read the Bible very much? If so, does the word “simple” really describe what you found? I don’t think so. The Bible is not simple, and people who try to make it simple mislead us. The Bible helps us find our way in life by introducing us to the God who loves us but who also insists upon leaving us free to trust and follow willingly and not because we are forced. The Bible is not a set of rules for every situation, and its compass points are not north, south, east, and west, but faith, hope, and love. Every time we ask, “How do I know?” we get the answer, “Trust me.”

God will not take away our freedom. Other people will try, and time itself will limit our possibilities, but God does not enslave people, not even for their own good. I can always choose not to trust God, not to believe Jesus and seek to follow him, not to care about that other person he calls my neighbor, and even not to take care myself.

God must convince Abram without proof to believe two promises: (1) that he and his wife will have a son from whom will come countless descendants and (2) that those descendants will inherit the land currently inhabited by the Canaanites. How does God convince us to believe what we cannot prove?

First of all, what God wants us to believe is much more about relationship than about particular outcomes. What does that mean? It means we are to want God's love more than we crave life's goods. If all I want from God is payoffs for being religious, I am not trusting but only bargaining. Suppose I'm a kid and every time my uncle comes to town, he brings me a present. When my parents tell me my uncle will be visiting us soon, I get excited and happy, but about what? Do I want to be with my uncle, or do I just want the present? If someday, he comes without a present, will I be just as glad to see him?

God loves us and wants us to love back. How do I love God back, when I cannot see or touch God or speak directly back and forth with God? Jesus gives us God's answer: trust in God's love for us, and care about the other people God loves, too. Join God in caring about the people treated unfairly, the people whose lives are broken, the people others around us despise and treat like dirt because they are somehow different or in some way disadvantaged. In the First Letter of John to the Christian churches, we read that anyone who claims to love God but hates this brother or that sister is a liar. We show our love for God or else our contempt for God by the way we treat other people.

When God tells Abram, *I brought you here to give you this land*, the man asks the skeptical question, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it." God's answer is remarkable.

What we see is a bloody ritual for the making of a covenant between an overlord and a tribal chieftain who has been conquered and is now forced to swear his allegiance to that overlord. Normally, the conquered chieftain would promise his loyalty to his new overlord and take a curse upon himself for any disobedience or infidelity. He would split the animal carcasses, then standing between them declare, "This to me and more also if I break my oath to you!" That means, "May I be split like these animals if I break my word." The oath proves nothing, but it does commit the chieftain to serving his overlord, and at that time, breaking one's oath was a fearsome thing to do. Besides, the overlord would be only too pleased to carry out the curse upon a man who betrays him.

What is remarkable in this covenant making is that the LORD God, not the man Abram, is the one who moves between the split carcasses, swearing the oath and making the self-proclaimed curse. God commits for life – for God’s life – to this man Abram and his descendants.

Jesus takes God’s commitment to its fulfillment, far beyond even the promise. In his living flesh-and-blood body, he represents fully God to us and, at the same time, us to God. He enters into, shares, and takes upon himself, the shame and humiliation of every person who is put to shame. In Gethsemane, he chooses as he has chosen all along, not to turn away from God and not to turn away from us and abandon us, either. Though all his hopes must die unfulfilled and he himself be made to seem nothing but an arrogant fool, he will not turn back but will walk alone into that terrible darkness, putting himself into the hands of the brutal and ruthless who care nothing for his life or anyone else’s but only for their own power and glory. “For God so loved the world.”

When we ask for proof that following Jesus Christ will pay off, that trusting God will benefit us, we are given instead of proof God’s committed love and Jesus’ promise to be with us, unseen and unverifiable by any of our senses or instruments, but real and alive. Proof? There is no proof, any more than you can prove that someone loves you and will stand by you through thick and thin. How do you prove love and faithfulness? You cannot. You can only trust and follow.

We Christians are increasingly a minority in our society. The churches no longer attract people as a matter of course, and as they have already in Europe, the churches in the United States will be forced to accept the fact that they no longer have power over the society and its people. “That’s awful!” we think. No, it’s not awful. Jesus did not send us to have power and prestige in the world, to be able to influence societies by force of any kind, whether guns or votes. He has entrusted to us only the “power” of love and faithfulness, the power to give ourselves in the service of people God loves whether they know it or not, whether they like it or not. Servants do not dictate; they serve, humbly.

These days, many Christians get quite upset about atheists and agnostics, as more and more people declare they do not believe in God, or do not know, or do not care. I have a suggestion. Instead of ranting at people who do not believe the truths in which we put our trust, suppose we live and serve in such a way that they might come to wish there really were such a God as we, by service and compassion, represent to them. Then they would be happy to learn someday that, indeed, there is such a God. We have tried imposing fear upon people. We have tried guilt. We have tried shame. We have tried heated argument and pressure. Jesus took instead the way of self-giving love and service. Maybe it’s high time we did it his way. Amen.