

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Dec 31st 2017

The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

As 2017 draws to a close, many of us are putting the finishing touches on some New Year's resolutions. In the readings for today, Abraham is an example of a man of faith. He can assist us in the decisions we make about how to live more faithfully in 2018.

The writer to the Hebrews says that Abraham believed God's promise that he would have an heir "for he thought that the one who had made the promise was trustworthy." Notice what the Genesis and Hebrews readings do not say - that he knew how God was going to fulfill his promise. It is one thing to believe that someone is trustworthy and will do what they say but it is another matter altogether to know how they are going to do it. In fact, Abraham seems to know how God is not going to do it. He is not going to give him a son from his wife, Sarah. So, he has certain suggestions for how God can pull it off. Proposal A is that he adopt one of his servants, Eliezer. This was not an uncommon way to obtain an heir and Eliezer must have been a loyal, noble person because Abraham made him the steward of his house. By the way, his "house" is not like anything we see today. Once Abraham had to gather the fighting men of his house to go and rescue his nephew, Lot, who had been taken captive. His fighting men numbered 318. Abraham was a wealthy man with a huge household and Eliezer was his right hand man. So, Proposal A isn't really a bad idea, from Abraham's standpoint. However, God says No, "your own issue shall be your heir." He knew God could not give him this heir through Sarah but at least now he knew that God would fulfill his promise through his own son and not an adopted servant. Abraham believed God.

That does not stop Abraham from offering Proposal B. Our Genesis reading for today comes from the 15th and 21st chapters of Genesis. In between those chapters you can read about Abraham's second proposal. Abraham has a son by one of his slaves. Since it is his own issue, Abraham just knows that God will fulfill his promise through this particular son. Again, God says No; you will have a son through your wife, Sarah. At this, Abraham laughs in God's face. Sarah also laughs. God, you made me a promise and we believe you. However, this way of fulfilling your promise is impossible. Sarah cannot have children. When Sarah becomes pregnant and has a son, Abraham and Sarah are so blown away by it that they remember how they laughed at the prospect and name their son Isaac which means "he who laughs." Every time they see Laughing Boy they remember that they laughed at God's promise right up until the day when they laughed for joy at this bouncing baby boy.

What can Abraham teach us who want to live by faith in 2018? On more than one occasion I have believed God's words but then decided to help God out by telling him how to fulfill them. We can learn an important lesson from Abraham: trust God and wait for him to do amazing things. He may fulfill his promise through some normal, natural way. On the other hand, he may fulfill it in a way that is unimaginable. Abraham trusted God from the beginning but had to learn how to stop telling God how to be God. Perhaps in 2018 we, too, will learn that God is not only trustworthy but that his ways are not our ways. May the God who does miracles grant us a Happy New Year.