

Presbytery of Boston

Stated Meeting 2012-01-21

First Presbyterian Church of Brookline

Worship service

Scripture readings

New Jerusalem Bible¹

Genesis 12:1-5

¹ Yahweh said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your kindred and your father's house for a country which I shall show you;

² and I shall make you a great nation, I shall bless you and make your name famous; you are to be a blessing!

³ I shall bless those who bless you, and shall curse those who curse you, and all clans on earth will bless themselves by you.'

⁴ So Abram went as Yahweh told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran.

⁵ Abram took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had amassed and the people they had acquired in Haran. They set off for the land of Canaan, and arrived there.

Exodus 3:1-14

¹ Moses was looking after the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led it to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

² The angel of Yahweh appeared to him in a flame blazing from the middle of a bush. Moses looked; there was the bush blazing, but the bush was not being burnt up.

³ Moses said, 'I must go across and see this strange sight, and why the bush is not being burnt up.'

⁴ When Yahweh saw him going across to look, God called to him from the middle of the bush. 'Moses, Moses!' he said. 'Here I am,' he answered.

⁵ 'Come no nearer,' he said. 'Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.

⁶ I am the God of your ancestors,' he said, 'the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.' At this Moses covered his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

¹ Quoted from the NJB online version at <http://www.catholic.org/bible/>

⁷ Yahweh then said, 'I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying for help on account of their taskmasters. Yes, I am well aware of their sufferings.

⁸ And I have come down to rescue them from the clutches of the Egyptians and bring them up out of that country, to a country rich and broad, to a country flowing with milk and honey, to the home of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites.

⁹ Yes indeed, the Israelites' cry for help has reached me, and I have also seen the cruel way in which the Egyptians are oppressing them.

¹⁰ So now I am sending you to Pharaoh, for you to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.'

¹¹ Moses said to God, 'Who am I to go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?'

¹² 'I shall be with you,' God said, 'and this is the sign by which you will know that I was the one who sent you. After you have led the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.'

¹³ Moses then said to God, 'Look, if I go to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors has sent me to you," and they say to me, "What is his name?" what am I to tell them?'

¹⁴ God said to Moses, 'I am he who is.' And he said, 'This is what you are to say to the Israelites, "I am has sent me to you." '

Mark 10:17–22

¹⁷ [Jesus] was setting out on a journey when a man ran up, knelt before him and put this question to him, 'Good master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'

¹⁸ Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.

¹⁹ You know the commandments: You shall not kill; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not give false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother.'

²⁰ And he said to him, 'Master, I have kept all these since my earliest days.'

²¹ Jesus looked steadily at him and he was filled with love for him, and he said, 'You need to do one thing more. Go and sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'

²² But his face fell at these words and he went away sad, for he was a man of great wealth.

Sermon

Called to be a Community of Faith

Arnold Rots

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

When we look at the story of the rich young man in Mark: what was it that Jesus asked of him? Last fall when it was the lesson during an evensong, it occurred to me that it was not just about money. Jesus asked him to give up his security in order to follow him. And that extends beyond the security that is represented by worldly possessions, by money; security is also found in convictions and beliefs – because beliefs offer an anchor that provides stability, comfort, and security in life. So, maybe we should be prepared to give them up, too?

Here is the central issue I want to raise: *belief* and *faith*, they are different things. The English language is lucky to have two different words for them, unlike most other languages – including the New Testament’s Greek. One might ask whether one could be more important than the other.

Let’s look at the other scripture readings that we just heard. Abram was called by God to become a pilgrim, to give up all security of a homeland, a familiar place, familiar people, a familiar religion, too, and go to a place he did not know. He was not asked to believe anything in particular or to have a systematic theology; he was asked to have faith – and respond to God’s call.

Moses was also called to give up the life that he knew and that provided security (after his scary experience in Egypt) – to go and do something radical. And he was asked to have faith in the god with the strange name: I am he who is; I will be there; I will be with you. He was not asked to subscribe to any deistic beliefs – only to have faith that God would be with him, and with the Israelites.

The mystery of that strange name is that it is an enigma to which we will never find a definitive answer. Every generation, every community has to fill it in, has to wrestle with the question what it means to them that God will be there, with them and for them; to find a name for God, to imagine God in a way that responds to their particular situation, that makes it possible to be truly church at that place and in that time. It is a

never-ending quest for an answer, knowing that there is no definitive answer for all times and all places. But it is also knowing that that quest is never in vain. Because the answer is, paradoxically, in trying to find an answer. Re-imagining is a crucial and never-ending part of the church's discerning her calling. And it is a quest that only has meaning in the context and in the language of faith. It is foolish to look for God outside that context. Those who tried only caused themselves and others endless trouble. Trying to prove God's existence or inserting God into scientific discourse has done incredible harm to the church – as well as to society.

The reading of a delightful little book helped in making it all fall in place: James Carse's *The Religious Case against Belief*; James Carse is emeritus professor of religion at NYU².

Belief systems are as much defined by what they stand for as by what they are against. Defining borders is very much part of them, it is often a matter of us-against-them; they have an adversarial character, are defensive, and they have an ossifying effect. Because of that, they tend to stifle religion, since they don't allow religion to evolve anymore, condemning the faith community to irrelevance.

Why is that? What is religion, if it is not a collection of beliefs? Carse provides a very interesting and challenging answer. Religion (and faith, I would add) is something that has endured the ages; that still inspires communities – communities that continue to ponder the mystery of that religion: always searching for an answer, one that is determined by, and valid for, a particular time and place. This is the eternal quest that I outlined a minute ago, where the value is in the searching – a searching that helps make sense of things.

And this is why I feel that beliefs have this dangerous potential to become killers of faith. Since they do not allow the answers to change, a religion based purely on beliefs becomes a caricature of faith and eventually becomes irrelevant. And so, the question becomes: Can faith fall victim to belief? Has faith fallen victim to belief?

One might ask: what about the Book of Confessions? Isn't this important part of our constitution all about beliefs? Not really: the most important (and probably least read) part is the Preamble. There it states clearly that these were statements of faith uttered

² James, P. Carse 2008, *The Religious Case against Belief*, The Penguin Press, New York

in a specific place and at a specific time, in specific circumstances that moved the community to feel the necessity to write down what their faith was about. So, it is not a collection of statements that we have to accept as eternal, objective truths. It is a collection of examples that tell us how previous generations and different communities wrestled with the mystery at the core of our faith and how they, tentatively, put it into words for their time.

The American Presbyterian tradition specifically rejected strict subscription, in the Adopting Act of 1729. This has served us well for almost three centuries. It was affirmed in 1927 after a 15-year attempt to bring subscription back in the form of the five fundamentals. That is why each PC(USA) council has to discern, for every examination anew, whether the candidate in question is adhering to the essentials of the reformed faith; there is no one-fits-all answer. And note: it says “the reformed faith”, not “the reformed beliefs”!

It also helps to keep in mind some of the basic principles in the opening articles of our Form of Government.

In the calling of the church:

The Church is to be a community of hope, rejoicing in the sure and certain knowledge that, in Christ, God is making a new creation. This new creation is a new beginning for human life and for all things. The Church lives in the present on the strength of that promised new creation.

The Church is to be a community of love, where sin is forgiven, reconciliation is accomplished, and the dividing walls of hostility are torn down.

In the historic principles:

[T]he Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) reaffirms the historic principles of church order, which have been a part of our common heritage and which are basic to our Presbyterian concept and system of church government, namely: That, while [...] we think it necessary to make effectual provision that all who are admitted as teachers be sound in the faith, we also believe that there are truths and forms with respect to which men of good characters and principles may differ. And in all these we think it the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other.

Squabbling over beliefs has nearly killed this denomination. It has done untold harm – to the kingdom of God, to this world, to the church, to presbyteries and congregations, and to individual human beings. This is not what we are called to do and be as Gods people.

Emphasis on beliefs puts one in danger of losing one's faith – because the comfortable security of cherished beliefs and convictions turns one deaf to the call to have faith.

Belief systems are, as I said, defined by what they believe as much as by what they do not believe; they need an adversary and really flourish in entrenchment. They become especially dangerous when beliefs are raised to the level of knowledge; as a scientist I can attest to that. What belief requires is that the believer stops thinking at the boundaries defined by belief – because that is where the beliefs of the adversary begins.

Faith, on the other hand, continuously extends the thinking beyond these boundaries, beyond what we can imagine; it is trying to see beyond the horizon of our imagination.

So, we should ask ourselves whether our beliefs are getting in the way of our faith; whether they are endangering our faith.

I think it would be good if we let go of our beliefs and dearly-held convictions, and learn to become once again a true community of faith; to be the church that God calls and means us to be. Let me say that again: **Let go of our beliefs and dearly-held convictions, and learn to become once again a true community of faith; to be the church that God calls and means us to be.** Can we still do that? **Can we still do that?** I challenge you to say: **YES!**

So that we may become a *communitas* that is united by not knowing where we will end up, but that is searching together to discern what it is that God calls and intends us to be, and how to play our part in realizing the kingdom of God.

Will you accept that challenge?

Amen.