

Conversations with God: Arguing Encouraged!
Genesis 18:23b-32 5/27/12

Today is the second Sunday in our new sermon series on conversations with God, an idea suggested to me by Richard Gray. While interconnected, each sermon will be designed to stand on its own.

Last week we saw how Abraham stands out as the first person in the recorded history of western civilization to break away from the imperial and impersonal view of God embodied in the empires of Mesopotamia and Egypt, and to break through to a personal, dialogical relationship with God. Last Sunday we saw how God condescended to meet Abraham in the context of the sacrificial customs of Abraham's day -- approximately 1800 b.c.e. -- and made a solemn covenant with Abraham. We saw how God reversed the roles common to covenant-making at the time, and how God rather than Abraham symbolically passed between two rows of cut-up sacrificial animals, signifying that God would rather die, as it were, than break God's promises. God's covenant with us -- God's promises to us -- is that strong!

This Sunday we face an extremely challenging text. On the one hand, we see Abraham so at-home in his relationship with God that he is emboldened to actually argue with God about the meaning of justice! Many consider the dialogue between Abraham and God that we heard this morning to be one of the most amazing encounters between God and a human being in all of recorded history. When we think about it, what an incredible leap it is from the rigid, impersonal, liturgies of the surrounding countries to Abraham's fearlessly taking on the Almighty in argument.

On the other hand, however, the context in which this argument takes place -- God's decision to wipe out the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah for their many sins of violence -- is, for many of us, intolerable. The question, of course, is can we have one without the other? Can we keep Abraham's argument with God and discard the violent way in which God is portrayed? Can we hang onto the earth-shaking, mind-blowing nature of Abraham's relationship with God and at the same time claim that the biblical text simply has it wrong when it states that ten righteous persons were not to be found and that God went ahead and blasted these cities off the map?

I think that we can.

However, given the fact that not everyone thinks this way, this is a good place to reaffirm the vision of this church which encourages *individual spiritual exploration*, which welcomes *independent-minded people*, and which seeks to build a diverse Christian community. For me the key word in our combined mission and vision statement is the word diverse. Unlike many Christian churches, in which group-think is encouraged, if not required, Community Church actually believes that dialogue, discussion, and disagreement are better ways to get to the truth than being told what we have to believe by pastor, session or board of governors, denomination, or doctrine.

So, I encourage you to challenge me if you think that I'm pushing things too far. Just because I'm up here in the pulpit doesn't mean that I have the final word. Only God has the final word, and it is God's word that we are struggling to discern together. So I want to say that God did not violently destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. And while we're at it, I also want to say that God did not cause the great flood described in the seventh and eighth chapters of Genesis, that God did not order the violent conquest of Canaan by the Israelites, and that God did not perform any of the multiple acts of violence for which the Bible gives God credit. The principle of biblical interpretation I use to maintain this position is known as the principle of God's accommodation or condescension.

Simply put, it means that God humbles Godself in order to meet us human beings where we are. If we think about it, God could not possibly communicate with us in a way that we could understand unless God accepted and worked through our limitations in terms of the time in which we live, the culture of which we are a part, and the unique personality which is ours. If God did not limit Godself to meet us where we are, God's communication would be so far beyond us that we wouldn't even know we were being spoken to.

As we saw last week, God wanted to communicate to Abraham that God's promises are absolutely trustworthy. How to do that in a way that Abraham can understand? God knows that Abraham has "cut" a covenant or two himself, so God condescends to meet Abraham in what to us -- living 4000 or so years later -- is the barbaric ritual of sacrificing a bunch of animals, splitting them in two, and then making the inferior party walk through the pieces. God manages to say something radically new to Abraham within this culture-bound ritual by surprisingly switching roles -- God, the superior party, moves through the pieces, instead of Abraham, the inferior party.

What about the flood? It's a well-established geological fact that there was an ancient flood of vast proportions. Given the fact that the ancients viewed God as the direct cause of everything, who could have created the flood but God? Moving on, given the fact that violent conquest was the norm at that particular time, how could God not get credit for ordering it? That's what the people thought they heard because that was the only thing that they were capable of hearing at that time.

Along with the theological principle of God's accommodation or condescension, we can use the principle of God's consistency to give ourselves permission not to have to believe all the violence attributed to God in scripture. James, the brother of Jesus, tells us in his new testament letter that "every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows." (James 1:17) God's nature does not change! Our understanding of God's nature is what changes! The letter to the Hebrews, also in the new testament, affirms that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today and forever." (Hebrews 13:8)

What can this mean except that the insistence on justice, the compassion, the forgiveness, the unconditional love, and the emphasis on nonviolence of the Jesus of the gospels was in the heart of God from the very beginning and will not go away. Ever. God's nature does not change! Our understanding of God's nature is what changes! The last interpretive principle that I would like to share with you today is the principle of development, which holds that the Bible's understanding of God develops, grows, becomes more profound, over time. All

scripture texts are not equal. Some are definitely more true than others. And we critique the lesser texts with the greater. For example, most Jewish biblical scholars agree that the most profound expression of God's true nature occurs in the suffering servant songs in the book of the prophet Isaiah. There God's servant -- God's direct representative -- is described in terms of justice, compassion, forgiveness, unconditional love, and nonviolence. Turns out that the high point of the old testament -- the suffering servant -- is the same as the high point of the new testament -- Jesus. God's nature does not change! Our developing understanding of God's nature is what changes!

Thus, given these three principles of interpretation: accommodation, consistency, and development --principles which are affirmed by non-fundamentalists in both the Jewish and Christian traditions, and which are to be found within scripture itself, I think we can say with a high degree of probability that God would actually encourage us to throw out descriptions of God that present God as violent and unforgiving.

Thus, out with God's violent destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. What happened if God did not destroy them? It was a natural disaster --geologists tell us probably something along the lines of the destruction of the roman city of Pompeii. But what about Abraham's arguing with God? Do we have to throw that out as well? I would argue -- definitely not! Why not? Because nothing remotely like it has come down to us from the imperial and impersonal religions of the neighboring empires - and we have a huge amount of written material from that time and place -- where could it possibly have come from except from an actual encounter between God and Abraham? What about a later Israelite author inventing it and using Abraham as his mouthpiece? --highly unlikely because the Abraham saga presents a striking unity of customs and speech patterns from exactly the time when Abraham is believed to have lived. True to the incredible accuracy of transmission which oral cultures enjoy, customs and speech patterns from 1800 b.c.e. that have long since changed have been handed down unchanged to the final editing of the bible around 500 b.c.e.

So let's say that we can keep this dialogue between Abraham and God. What does it teach us? It teaches us that God likes a good argument! It teaches us not to be afraid to be bold with God! It teaches us that God desires to engage -- and to be engaged. It teaches us that a personal relationship with God is just that -- a personal relationship. Unlike the gods of Egypt and Mesopotamia, whom no one but a priest or king would dare to address -- and then only in highly impersonal and gushingly flattering liturgical language -- the God of Abraham desires to be spoken to as a person, a person who wants to hear our fears, our joys, our sorrows... even our arguments!

It teaches us that a good conversation with God is the very heart and center of what we call the Bible. It teaches us that one of the greatest teachings the bible has to give us is that we can talk to God just like Abraham did. It teaches us that, as this morning's anthem had it, "in my father's heart always my dwelling place shall be." It teaches us that, as Hafiz's poem has it, God wants to dance with us, and that an important part of that dance consists of our conversations with God.

Amen.

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