

I've been in a number of Bible study groups since coming into Christianity as an adult. I haven't really cared for them for the most part. The format tends to be, that people read a passage and talk about how it 'speaks' to them. They slip into a pattern like, "This passage reminds me that my mother was mean to me and I'm still depressed about it." Then the next person reads the same passage and it's all unicorns and rainbows. No thanks.

When I decided to do Bible studies at Union Church I was determined not to go there. I'm happy to say that our two Bible studies are not that way at all. I do some teaching in them and we've yet to have a session that there wasn't laughter.

The fact that I do some teaching means that I prepare for Bible studies. I do some of the same research that I do for sermons. A common practice in sermon preparation is to read the same passage in different Bible translations. We are currently in the book of Genesis. We are in the immensely important section on Abraham.

Abraham is viewed as the father of three major world religions: Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The three Abrahamic faiths have different views of him. For Jews, Abraham is first and foremost an ancestor. Abraham is the starting point of the Jewish people. For

Christians, Abraham was the first monotheist. Abraham was born into a world where it was believed that there were many gods. Abraham was the first to realize that there is one God. For Muslims, Abraham is the symbol of ultimate obedience.

Anyway, I was reading different translations of chapter fifteen of Genesis, and I found something that set me on a path that affected the Bible study and resulted in this sermon and ultimately my theological thinking. The King James Version of the Bible reads in Genesis 15: 6 “Abraham believed in God.” The New Revised Standard Version which is in our pulpit reads, “Abraham believed God.” One English translation says Abraham believed in God, another says, Abraham believed God. No big deal you might say. I say that it is a huge deal! Let me try to explain.

To believe in God is a statement about God, that God exists and is not just the product of wishful thinking. It is theology rather than behavior. A theology is something that exists in someone’s heart and mind.

To believe God is a statement about Abraham. Abraham was prepared to not just affirm the reality of God, but to trust God. Abraham put all his eggs in one basket. He trusted God to do what God promised to do. He also was completely obedient to God, doing some very painful things that God told him to do.

My inclination is to choose the second translation... that Abraham believed God. Abraham's behavior showed that he not only believed that God existed but that he had faith that God's promises could be relied upon. When I say that I have faith in my wife, I'm not just saying that I think that she exists but I have faith that she will do the right thing. It takes two to tango and two to have a trusting relationship. Abraham trusted God. He believed that God's will would ultimately prevail.

This realization illuminates for me maybe the most difficult passage in all of scripture after the crucifixion of the Lord. The story is commonly known as 'the binding of Isaac.' When God first came to Abraham he and his wife Sarah were in their seventies and childless. God told Abraham that God would make Abraham the patriarch of more children than there are stars in the sky. Sure enough, Sarah had a son named Isaac.

Then God tells Abraham to take Isaac to the land of Moriah and sacrifice his son. I told you that this is a terrible story. There have been hundreds of commentaries written on this passage. The majority see it as God testing the limits of Abraham's faith.

By believing God, Abraham trusted God. God would keep God's word. Abraham trusted God to keep the promise that he would become the father of a great nation. He was prepared to go ahead with

the command to sacrifice Isaac because he trusted God to keep that promise. Then sure enough, when Abraham had the knife at the ready, an angel from God stayed Abraham's hand.

Abraham's trust in God involved not only a vision of the world as it can be, but believing that one day the world will be the world God intends it to be. The faith of Abraham is the theology of not-yet.

Now I have a formidable question for you. Do you think that we can trust the world? Is ours a world in which people can count on getting what they deserve? I look at the evidence and I can't say yes, but I refuse to say no. So, I answer, "Not Yet."

Robert F. Kennedy said, "Some people see the world as it is and ask, 'Why?' I look at the world as it might be and ask, 'Why not?'" I cannot abide it when people say, 'I guess this is the way God wanted the world to be so we just have to learn how to live with it.' We must reject that defeatist thinking and have the courage to work for a better day.

It is a theology of 'not yet.' It calls us to see all that is wrong with the world as it is now and refuse to accept that it has to be this way forever. There are forces striving to make the world a better place. I see those forces as the embodiments of God's will.

Abraham had Sarah tell the Pharaoh that she was his sister and not his wife because of the divine right of kings. That was the practice

that if a king found a man's wife desirable he could have the man killed and take his wife into his harem. That is gone, now.

We've had the Spanish Inquisition, the Holocaust, two World Wars let's hope and pray that those never ever happen again. Is the world still a messy place? Of course, it is. War, famine, natural disasters, terrorism, and mass shootings still exist but there is more.

I grew up in a world with childhood diseases that could have made my life difficult- mumps, measles, chicken pox, polio. But my generation saw medical researchers refuse to accept the idea that those diseases would hurt future generations. Now they now know how to treat and prevent those diseases.

I'm a pastor. I visit people in hospitals. I officiate at funerals. I hold the hands of grieving loved ones. I have an idea of how much pain and undeserved anguish there is in God's world. But I compare it to the world in which I grew up. Literacy is now nearly universal. Education is widely available, up to and including college and vocational training. People are living longer and leading more productive lives.

My Irish grandfather and namesake, James Conley Sr. is the longest living family member. He died a month after his 70th birthday. I'm thinking of possible retirement when I'm 70. In two generations, average lifespan increased 25 years.

Abraham grew up in a world where people worshiped idols. Religion meant bribing gods through sacrifice to fulfill your request. By the time Abraham died, religion had matured to an effort to learn God's will and live in harmony with it.

Abraham lived in a world where the strong dominated the weak and the weak had no recourse. That still happens in too many places today, but where it does, we no longer say, "Well, that's human nature." The theology of the world becoming the world that God intends it to be is happening but it's not there yet.

I believe that God is still trying to get the world that God intends. Jesus Christ is evidence of that. Martin Luther King Jr said famously, "The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice."

It bends toward honesty, and toward forgiveness, toward generosity and toward love. There is much work to do. It is up to us. We are children of Abraham. We are people who not only believe in God, but believe God. We have the opportunity to move this effort forward so that God's will for the world will be fulfilled. Are we there or even close? Not yet! But let each of us work to bring about the day when what should be, will be. AMEN