

**A sermon delivered by  
The Rev. David W. Fleenor**

**The Church of the Transfiguration  
1 E. 29<sup>th</sup> Street, New York, New York**

**Sunday, February 28, 2010  
Second Sunday in Lent**

[Genesis 15:1-12,17-18](#)

[Philippians 3:17-4:1](#)

[Luke 13:\(22-30\)31-35](#)

[Psalm 27 or 27:10-18](#)

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Twenty-two years ago on this very day, I came to faith. Or faith came to me. It depends on how you see it.

A good Lenten practice is to share your story of faith at least once in the 40 days, and that is what I am going to do today. Everyone is on the journey and has a story to tell. And telling it is one of the finest ways we have to practice Evangelism – which is not a dirty word for us Episcopalians. Your story may be a spark to light the fire of faith in a neighbor, co-worker, or friend.

To understand my journey of faith, I must begin by telling you a story about my parents. It was 1987 and my father had just purchased a motorcycle. He and my mother were enjoying an October ride through the Blue Ridge Mountain of Virginia. No one is sure exactly what happened, but we think that as they entered a curve they both leaned too far to the left and tumbled off the motorcycle down into a ravine. My mother crushed her thumb, and my father dislocated his shoulder, broke a few ribs, and scaped up his face. Later that night I would meet them in the Emergency Room and, at the tender age of twelve, have my first glimpse of trauma and of my parents' mortality. Many months later they recovered from their physical injuries, but for my father something in his soul had been stirred. He started going to church – the same Southern Baptist church that most of my family members had attended when they chose to go, most often on Christmas and Easter. Soon, and much to my chagrin, my father began inviting me to go with him, but I declined. After a few weeks his invitation transformed into an ultimatum: "You will go to church with me next Sunday." I appealed to my mother who was less interested in church than me, but to no avail. My father insisted, so I went.

It turned out that it wasn't nearly as bad as I had imagined it would be. Eventually, I joined the youth group and began to learn about the Christian faith. A few months later the Youth Pastor sat me down and had a talk with me. He explained that I was a sinner and that Christ died for my sins. If I were to accept Jesus as my Lord and Savior then I would be saved from my sins and from Hell, and have a place reserved for me in Heaven. All I had to do was invite Christ in. I told him I would think about it and we left it at that. Over the next few months I pondered this proposal intensely. I had lots to consider: I didn't want to go to Hell, I wanted to belong to this

new community, and I wanted to know that I was loved on the deepest level by God, the ultimate reality. At age 12, of course, I couldn't have verbalized these reasons. I've spent several decades reflecting on this event and this is how I currently make sense of it. Eventually, I decided to invite Christ into my life.

As was customary in this faith tradition, I "walked the aisle" on Feb. 28<sup>th</sup>, 1988 and gave my life to Christ. "Walking the aisle" is a colloquialism that describes the emotional journey at the end of the worship service of walking from my seat down the aisle to tell the pastor of my decision to accept Christ, pray to invite Christ in, and then to publicly proclaim it to the congregation.

What I have just described is a very Protestant way to come to faith, and not the only way. I told this story to someone recently and he exclaimed, "But what about people like me who have no date and no story. I've just always been a Christian. Doesn't that count?" Of course it does. People come to faith in all sorts of ways for all sorts of reasons.

Much happened between now and then, and we are obviously not in a Baptist church today. But that is a long story and I will save it for another time.

### **What is faith?**

All of this raises an important question: what is faith? We get a glimpse of it from Abraham, the Father of faith, in the OT lesson.

The Scripture says,

*[God] brought [Abram] outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.*

This passage doesn't define faith for us, rather it illustrates it. It is hard to define faith beyond belief or confidence in something. Mark Twain said, "Faith is believing what you know ain't so."<sup>1</sup> This is what Abraham did. He is known as the father of our faith, in part, because of his belief or confidence in God's promise to give him offspring despite his reality of being old and having a barren wife. He believed that God could make possible what appeared impossible.

In a really terrible 1994 movie called *The Santa Clause* starring Tim Allen, there is a great line about faith. Little Elf Judy says to an unbelieving would-be Santa, "Seeing isn't believing. Believing is seeing."

I wonder about that definition of faith, especially in light of Abraham's story. Did God fulfill the promise because Abraham saw it and believed it; or was Abraham able to have this vision because he already had faith in God? It is a chicken and egg kind of question.

### **Logical Positivism and Biocentrism**

There is a conversation among scientists right now that relates to this question. One school of thought known as logical positivism asserts if you can't measure or observe a phenomenon, then

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.twainquotes.com/Faith.html>

it does not exist and you shouldn't believe in it. Many modern day atheists like Richard Dawkins subscribe to this approach. Since God can't be observed or measured, then God does not exist.

Another school of thought is emerging, though, that I find very interesting. Recently while doing some research on emerging stem cell treatments for a variety of illnesses, especially blindness, I came across Dr. Robert Lanza and his theory of *biocentrism*. I'll tell you about his theory in a minute, but first let me tell you a little about him because he is a fascinating character. Have you ever seen the movie *Good Will Hunting* starring Matt Damon and Ben Affleck? Some have described Lanza as the real life Will Hunting – a boy genius who grew up on the rough streets of South Boston.<sup>2</sup> He was a loner who spent most of his time exploring the woods as a child. He stayed clear of his disinterested and sometimes abusive parents in order to minimize physical abuse. His school labeled him “slow” and placed him in lower level classes until one particular science teacher, who happened to be his neighbor, noticed how smart he really was. She invited him to participate in the science fair and he won second prize. He was so motivated that he decided he would win it the next year. And he did, at age 14 in 1969 when, in his basement, he altered the genetic makeup of a white chicken to make it pigmented; he did this only three years after scientists had cracked the genetic code. “That extraordinary early feat, eventually published in the journal *Nature*, signaled a raw scientific talent that his mentors (who came to include Jonas Salk and B. F. Skinner) likened to Einstein's.”<sup>3</sup> Recently he has done groundbreaking work with stem cells, including generating some from skin cells instead of from embryos which helps get around some of the sticky ethical issues.

In his spare time, Lanza has developed a theory of the universe called *biocentrism*. It is so called because he places biology at the top of all the other sciences in his effort to explain the universe. He suggests that the universe did not create life; rather, life created the universe. He takes issue with the notion that “...the laws of the world were somehow created to produce the observer.” He argues instead that “...the observer in a significant sense creates reality and not the other way around.”<sup>4</sup> To illustrate his point he tells this story:

While I was sitting one night with a poet friend watching a great opera performed in a tent under arc lights, the poet took my arm and pointed silently. Far up, blundering out of the night, a huge Cecropia moth swept past from light to light over the posturings of the actors. “He doesn't know,” my friend whispered excitedly. “He's passing through an alien universe brightly lit but invisible to him. He's in another play; he doesn't see us. He doesn't know. Maybe it's happening right now to us.”<sup>5</sup>

Could it be happening right now to us? Could a whole other world that we are unable to see and access be unfolding right in front of us right now? Through the eyes of faith, I would say yes...and I think Abraham would agree.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.usnews.com/usnews/culture/articles/011203/archive\\_019784\\_4.htm](http://www.usnews.com/usnews/culture/articles/011203/archive_019784_4.htm)

<sup>3</sup> <http://discovermagazine.com/2008/sep/19-fighting-for-the-right-to-clone>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.theamericanscholar.org/a-new-theory-of-the-universe/>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Abraham believed God could give an old man and a barren woman innumerable offspring, as many as the stars in the sky. By the way, scientists estimate that there are between 10 sextillion and 1 septillion stars in the universe. Abraham began with one son, Isaac who begat Jacob, who begat 12 sons who would become the 12 tribes of Israel. Today Christians, Jews, and Muslim – some 3.5 billion people – claim Abraham as their father, and that doesn't count the billions who have throughout history.

There was another important figure in our faith who believed in a world, a kingdom really, that we cannot yet see, but does exist. Jesus preached about the Kingdom of God as a place where peace and justice reign. This is the Kingdom that is both already and not yet in our midst.

Many mystics were considered lunatics because of what they claimed to see, which reminds me of something Fr. Clair said in his sermon two weeks ago. He defined a hallucination as seeing something that is not there and a vision as seeing what is really there. But how do we know? Through discernment in a community of faith. All of us hold a piece of the truth and through the process of mutual exploration we are able to make it clearer. That is why it is important to share your story, your experience.