

“What Luck?”

First Christian Church

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Omaha, Nebraska

Second Sunday after Pentecost

Scripture Text: Genesis 22:1-14

Abraham’s story as told by scripture reads much like a Chinese Parable I have heard many times. The Chinese Parable goes like this:

Once upon a time, there was a farmer in the central region of China. He didn't have a lot of money and he used an old horse to plow his field. One afternoon, while working in the field, the horse dropped dead. Everyone in the village said, "Oh, what a horrible thing to happen." The farmer said simply, "We'll see." He was so at peace and so calm, that everyone in the village got together and, admiring his attitude, gave him a new horse as a gift. Everyone's reaction now was, "What a lucky man." And the farmer said, "We'll see."

One day the horse escaped into the hills and everyone in the village shook their heads and said, "What a poor fellow!"

The farmer smiled and said, "We'll see."

A week later the horse returned with a herd of wild horses from the hills and this time the neighbors congratulated the farmer on his good luck.

The farmer said, "We'll see."

Then, when the farmer’s son was attempted to tame one of the wild horses, he fell off its back and broke his leg. Everyone in the village said, "What a

shame for the poor boy."

The farmer said, "We'll see."

Some weeks later the army marched into the village and conscripted every able-bodied youth they found there. When they saw the farmer's son with his broken leg they did not take him.

Everyone said, "What a fortunate young man."

The farmer smiled again - and said "We'll see." (This version of the parable is a combination of several versions found on the Internet)

In the biblical story from Genesis, if looked at from one perspective, Abraham is a very lucky man. He has been singled out by God and is the recipient of five promises—in fact—promise stands at the beginning of Abraham's story. God's promises are decisive for the future of Abraham and his family and through them, all the world's families. God's promises to Abraham and in some instances, his wife Sarah are:

- **A son**
- **Land**
- **Nation, name, kings, descendants**
- **Blessing**
- **Presence**

Look at these same promises another way and the *luck* of being chosen by God suddenly pales.

In order for Abraham to obtain the land he was promised, he first had to negotiate with his nephew Lot. Finally, after the land is divided, Abraham

must take military action to hold on to the land. So much for a lucky, easy promise of land.

God promises Abraham and Sarah a son with a multitude of descendants that includes kings and a nation—but this wonderful, lucky sounding promise comes to a couple who are elderly—Sarah is well beyond child bearing years. So much for the luck of Abraham.

But Sarah and Abraham are not without resources. They are not shy about taking matters into their own hands. Abraham is also not shy about arguing with God—if he thinks circumstances demand it. Calling to God to task about God’s actions.

As God prepares to destroy Sodom, Abraham challenges God about the possibility of destroying the righteous along with those who are not. He confronts God: “Will not the judge of earth do right?” (Genesis 18:25c) God replies, “If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake?” (Genesis 18:26a) and the bargaining goes on: Abraham: what about five less than fifty? God: okay if I find 45, I’ll relent; Abraham: What about 40? God: Ok, 40 then; Abraham: How about 30? God, Ok 30; Abraham: How about twenty? God: Ok, I’ll go for 20.; Abraham: Ok but what if there are ten? God: Ok, if there are ten I’ll leave it alone. At that point Abraham stops his challenge and God goes on God’s way.

Abraham and Sarah have no qualms about taking God’s promise into their own hands when no son is forth coming. They arrange for Abraham to conceive a son with Sarah’s maid, Hagar. As a result, Ishmael is born. When a son, Isaac, is finally born to Abraham and Sarah, they throw

Hagar and Ishmael out into the desert to fend for themselves—and it is God who intervenes and makes essentially the same promise to Hagar in relation to Ishmael that was made to Abraham and Sarah in relation to Isaac. Ishmael will become the progenitor of many descendants and a land with many people.

The scripture passage we read today focus on Abraham and Isaac—we don't know just how old Isaac was but that is not the point. I must say before we look at the passage further, I find it somewhat disturbing on at least a couple of points. First of all, God says to Abraham, “Take your son, your only son...”—wait a minute—what about Ishmael?—Did God forget about him—or is God, just discounting him? Second, what happened to Abraham and his courage? He has no qualms about arguing with God about the destruction of Sodom, he and Sarah have no problem taking things into their own hands when God is acting too slow for them in delivering on the promise of a son? So, why does Abraham behave the way he does when God tells him to take his son, Isaac, up on the mountain and sacrifice him” Does Abraham even ask a question—no—God says go sacrifice your son and Abraham suddenly becomes a meek, no questions ask man and responds sure fine—calls Isaac to go on a journey, picks up his knife, gathers up the firewood (which by the way, he makes Isaac carry) and heads out to sacrifice his son—easy as packing up to go on a family picnic.

So, we come to the question for this morning - was Abraham lucky - or was it something else? How might Abraham have seen his being chosen to receive God's promises?

In our own day and time, there is a lot of focus on luck. There is even a website for luckology. Luckology is defined as “the belief in the ability to successfully attract Good Luck, and turn Bad Luck into Good Luck over and over again.” Ric Wallace the site’s proprietor, says the formula for being lucky is Belief + Attitude + An Item of luck = Results. Wallace claims to have won several lotteries and contests using his method, which, seems very similar to other philosophies of luck attraction, such as *The Secret*. You just have to want something badly enough, including heaping amounts of luck, and, so the thought goes, you’ll receive it. (Homiletics.com; May/June 2011)

As the economy falters, the numbers of lottery tickets being sold have increased—the dream of striking it rich and doing it the easy way—easy that is, if you’re lucky. In these hard time people are not heading for the bank for financial advice—they are heading to the local *Gas-n-Food* to pick up a bunch of lottery tickets. In 2010 total revenue from state lotteries was up by \$1 billion from the previous year. People seem to be relying on Lady Luck to be their financial advisor. Albert Atwood of Nashville, who spends \$100 weekly to ply Pick 5 and Lotto Plus says: “Someday, somebody is going to win, and I hope it is me.” I imagine I would be a heap better off if I saved this money, but everybody has dreams.” If you do the math—saving \$100 per week would result in a savings of \$5,200 over the course of a year—plus it could be earning at least some interest. It makes sense, then, that some people believe that the lottery is a tax on people who can’t do math—or in perhaps for people in Faith Communities—it is a symptom of a lack of faith. (Homileticsonline.com; May/June 2011)

Luckology had been around almost as long as humanity. Ancient people assumed the world was a random place and forces beyond their control

gave them good or bad luck in arbitrary. Pantheistic religions believed the gods used fortune and misfortune to manipulate human lives; thus it was best to please the gods who might give you fortune and avoid ticking off the ones who gave you could give you a run of bad luck. Then, as now, people in crisis tend to organize their theological worldview around the immediacy of the lucky break—that Wayne Oates calls a “secular religion.”

So was Abraham lucky? Abraham could certainly have considered himself to be really lucky. It was as if, God had chosen him at random out of all the people living in Mesopotamia at the time—giving all those promises to a wandering man from Ur—Abraham had hit the jackpot. “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.” (Genesis 12:2-3) (Homileticsonline.com; May/June 2011)

In Abraham’s world a man’s fruitful family line and divine favor were the equivalent of hitting the Powerball numbers—Abraham’s luckology was working overtime—after all he and his wife were old—beyond childbearing age. But, later Abraham will learn that luck really had nothing to do with his fortune, his prosperity or the birth of his son. Abraham’s God, unlike the gods of the pantheistic Canaanites in whose land Abraham wonders, isn’t handing out arbitrary blessings and curses, “good luck” and “bad luck.” Abraham’s God is focused on obedience and what we typically call “providence.” The “binding of Isaac,” as it is known among the rabbis, is a lesson in radical dependence on God as the real Provider of all we need. (Homileticsonline.com; May/June 2011)

When God tells Abraham “Take your son, your only son Isaac; whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that shall show you.” (Genesis 22:2). Abraham must have been cut to the heart—although as I said earlier, I find it difficult to understand that Abraham does not even question or hesitate. But, Abraham doesn’t hesitate—at least not according to the text. It is important to keep in mind that this story came after Abraham has walked with God for many years. He has experienced God providing for him over and over again. He has come to rely on God—not luck—and so he is able to count on God to sustain him in this time of testing. (Homileticsonline.com; May/June 2011)

We know how the story ends—at the last moment, an angel stills Abraham’s hand and he sees a ram caught in a thicket—the appropriate sacrifice has been provided. What appears to be a cruel twist of fate is instead turned into a lesson on providence.

Wayne Oats writes that if luck is a secular faith, the belief in providence is a sacred one. “The sacred option for dealing with the givens of life springs from a steadfast faith in the providence of God,” he says. “A believer in providence, although not able to see the hand of God at work in a given situation of one’s lot in life, nevertheless holds to the faith that God will deliver him or her from the forced situation according to the distant purpose God has for his or her life....This faith in providence is lived in a community of faith, not in isolation and self-sufficiency.”

(Homileticsonline.com; May/June 2011)

Faith in luck is a lonely faith, a fatalistic acquiescence to chance. Faith in God and God’s providence, on the other hand, is faith in a relationship

with One who promises to supply what we need, when we need it, “according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19).

If luck is all about the individual pursuit of everything we think we *want*, then providence is about accepting the promise that God supplies everything we *need*—and not just for us, but for all God’s people. While luck seeks to obtain, providence invites us to share. Luck buys lottery tickets. Providence is invested in a community.

Where do you put your faith? James Cox tells of walking along the main street in San Francisco’s Chinatown. He came upon a little shop with an image of a Laughing Buddha sitting at the entrance. Beside it was a sign that read, “For wisdom, rub my head. For good luck, rub my belly.” Cox looked closely at the Laughing Buddha. The tummy—the focus of good luck was almost rubbed clean of paint. Looking at the head—the focus of wisdom, he found the paint there looked as if no one had every touched the head. (Homileticonline.com; May/June 2011)

In what do you put your faith?

Abraham was not luckologist, nor are we. Faith is a reminder that we’re never really lucky. Blessed, but not lucky.