

# Memories that Feed You

“You believe because of somebody.”

Deuteronomy 26: 1-11

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## Without Words

What first convinced you to believe in God? What opened you up to God's grace so that the love of Jesus got into you never to let you go? I'll ask it another way: “What was the first page of Scripture you read?”

I know that as much as my decision to really and finally let God in was made on an unlit trail in the woods in the middle of the night with no one around, it was not done in isolation. Before I could read, there was my mother singing the songs of faith and reading from *Egermeier's Bible Story Book* the tales of David and Goliath, Jesus and Peter, Abraham and Sarah, Noah and the boat. There was my dad, faithfully taking his place with the ushers at church. There was my grandmother telling me that faith was just as much about doing as it was about believing. All around me there were teachers in the Sunday school nursery and pastors and members of the choir living out the faith, telling me about it, showing it. It was as if they were letting their lives become the pages I could read even before I *could* read. Now, how did you first “read the Faith?”

## Access to God

If you were to have lived in Israel after David and Solomon had come and gone and the people of Israel had enjoyed the fruits of this land of God's fulfilled promise for hundreds of years, you would have heard and obeyed the instruction: to bring in a basket the first fruits of a year's effort, a tenth of your grain, olive and date, take it before the priest and say in effect, “I have claimed my inheritance. I live in the land God promised to my ancestors.” Then, when the priest accepted your offering you would have said, “A wondering Aramean was my ancestor...” and then recount the story of your people, how your ancestors, from Abraham and Sarah to Isaac and Rebekah, to the children of Jacob, Leah and Rachel and how they settled in the land of Egypt and grew in number. You would have declared that God heard the cries of your ancestors when the Egyptians held them in cruel bondage and remembered how, with signs and wonders, God empowered Moses and Miriam and Aaron to rescue them and lead them out of that land and across a parted sea and through the wilderness. You would have

recalled the way God fed them and gave them water in the midst of the desert and led them to the land.

Like your parents and your grandparents and your ancestors who came before them, you would have remembered this story, repeated it, bursting with thanksgiving the way even the first of them couldn't contain it within. It would have been your story, you see. It wasn't just something that happened a long time ago that expresses the nature of God as a good illustration or a favorite bedtime story. This was your story. You would have said it in the first person. You would have said, "When we were in bondage," and "when God led us out of Egypt." Then just as you are wrapped in the events of the lives of those who went before you, you could fully live in the blessing of God's promises come true in your land today.

All this is salvation history, God's story of redeeming you and me when we were in peril and making a people out of us when we weren't really anything to speak of. The point of all this is that when you refer to Abraham your ancestor, look to his life and see his struggles and hopes, his relationship to God and the faith dawning on him, you are examining some of the first pages of the Bible, long before it was put into writing. A scholar put it like this: in Abraham, God has become accessible.<sup>1</sup>

I always liked what my theology professor said about belief. He said, "You believe because others have believed before you. And others before them. And somehow, through Peter's eyes, you have seen the Risen Lord.

The pages of this Book are filled with the witness of God's love made accessible in the lives of people. That's what scripture is: the story of their lives and encounters with God, the record of their reflections – how they understood the event and God and the world in light of it; how they figured out their own calling and came to shape the world after God's heart. The Bible points to them as it points to God. The writing, then, exceeds what is just written. In Abraham, you were given access to God; so too in: Moses and Ruth; Mary the mother of Jesus; and of course especially in Jesus, himself.

Then the witness continued through all the heroes who came later; in someone who touched your life and in someone before them who touched theirs. Each of them, people through whom God become accessible; each of them pages of the Bible that exceed that which was written in the Book.

You believe because others have believed before you. And finally through Peter's eyes you have seen the Risen Lord. The Author, you see, is still writing the Book.

### **The Bible's Further Reach**

Access to God through the lives of those who have gone on before us. This is the way God works: turning out redemptive love, appearing in the events of human lives, each time calling people out to unassuming sainthood, then weaving the instance into God's ongoing story of salvation.

The other night our Confirmation class gathered in my study to meet with a saint of our church who could tell them something about the story of our local congregation. This was a culmination of several evening studies in which we tried to do history in a way that wasn't painful. History is important. When you study the Faith so you can embrace it and make a commitment to it, it's important to know where we come from: why is it that we believe the things that we do. Why do we practice worship and mission the way we play them out? Why do we have certain dreams for the world and think that God has in a stake in them? So rather than teach history with timelines to be learned, we put a human face on it. Each week, Ray Blessman, Josh Wright, and I took on the personalities of the story in period dress, telling their story and, remaining in character, answering class questions. The Apostle Paul who laid the foundation for understanding Jesus; Augustine Bishop of Hippo who gave understanding to personal faith; Francis of Assisi who was passionate about helping the needy; Martin Luther who convinced us this was all about God's grace; Methodist founder John Wesley who convinced us about the present work of the living God; Garfield Bromley Oxnam Bishop of California in the 40's and 50's who helped shaped the work of Methodists in society for the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries: each came and told their story and the story of the church through their eyes. These are the shoulders upon which today's Christians stand.

So having a taste of the long history of the world-wide church, our Confirmands gathered in my study face-to-face with a long-time member of First United Methodist of Royal Oak. Keith Leenhouts told his story about coming to Royal Oak as a boy in the '30's, wide-eyed at the immensity of the church, yet quickly won over by the love of its people. And this man who's touch the lives of so many young people and adults through the years spoke of significant influences on his life who were a part of this church: a 6<sup>th</sup> grade school teacher who made him feel like somebody an older judge who mentored for him the ministry of the judiciary.

These were saints of the church who touched his life, teaching and enabling, inspiring and empowering Keith to touch others.

And so it goes. Later, I asked a couple of class members what they thought of the evening's session and they said, "Oh, I loved it. And I'm not just saying that." Then one of them said that he was one of the persons in this church she most loved. His love and his influence for her parents and her, you see, has been a page of scripture to be read and cherished and always remembered.

Now, *who* was the first page of Scripture you read? *Who* convinced you it was worth believing in God? In *whom* did God become accessible?

Finally, this question is at least as important as all the rest: who is out there today reading *you*?

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald E. Clements, "The Book of Deuteronomy", *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. II. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998. p 480.