

Beyond All Doubt
Under the Banner of Heaven, Jon Krakauer
Genesis 22:1-14
Hebrews 11:1-3, 17-19
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This week and next I am using contemporary literature to discuss faith. Today, as we look at faith, I'd like to talk about the tension between faith and doubt. Can we or should we trust completely. The question is, "Should we have blind faith? Is doubt really a bad thing?"

Under the Banner of Heaven by Jon Krakauer, is a nonfiction account of the history of the Mormon Church and a description of fundamentalist polygamist sects that exist today. It is estimated that there are between 30,000 and 100,000 Mormon Fundamentalists in the American West, Canada, and Mexico. That's about 1% of all Mormons; most of whom do not affiliate with fundamentalist Mormons at all. These fundamentalists practice child marriage, what our society believes to be sexual assault and child abuse, that is, coercing young girls at the age of 14 and 15 to marry and be impregnated by older men, many of whom have other wives. These fundamentalists live in isolated communities, such as in Colorado City at the Utah-Arizona border. Here the religious leader, Rulon Jeffs, a 92-year-old at the time of the writing of this book, had married something like 75 women and fathered at least 65 children. Several of his wives were given to him when they were 14 or 15, and he was in his eighties. Rulon Jeffs has since died, and his son Warren has proclaimed himself "prophet," and is now serving time in prison for being convicted as an accomplice in two rapes.

The author reports that the Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints claim they receive divine revelation to justify, in fact ordain, their sexual practices. They claim they have done nothing wrong; they are following God's will. *Under the Banner of Heaven* tells the story of how two men following "the will of God" murdered a young woman and her baby in cold blood. They admitted the crime; in fact, they felt no remorse. To them, their actions were "under the banner of heaven."

Krakauer's book carries the subtitle "A Story of Violent Faith." Now, you might think that violence and faith don't go together; faith shouldn't cause violence. This book warns that fundamentalist faith breeds violence in communities where people are expected to accept doctrine without question. Krakauer warns of the dangers of the FLDS Church and of any fundamentalist religion.

You'll remember two years ago, in the news, we learned of an FLDS community in Eldorado, Texas. We all watched on television, when child welfare authorities pulled 440 children away from their mothers at a ranch in this secluded Texas community. The children, of the Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints sect were removed, after a call came from someone claiming to be a pregnant 16-year-old in an abusive marriage to an older man. Occasionally, someone like this reports abuse or runs away, but generally girls are raised to expect to be married off young, to live on welfare as single mothers (in the eyes of the state), and to be obedient to their husbands who are fathering children by a number of wives. I ask myself, "How can women go along with

this? Don't they question the authority of their church leaders? How can this kind of blind faith be a good thing?"

It appears that faith can be very dangerous.

The textbook that I used in my theology class in seminary was called *Faith Seeking Understanding*. The whole premise was that theological inquiry should be the basis of faith. There should be an on-going quest for truth, a quest using critical reflection. We are to be "pilgrims of faith," moving on a journey toward greater understanding of who God is and how God would have us live. We are not pawns told what to believe or how to act.

Well, what about Abraham? You heard the story of how God told him to sacrifice his own son! Wasn't he a pawn in God's hand? Why did he not question God? What kind of a God tells you to kill your own child? And what kind of a father would even threaten to murder his own son? I don't like this Bible story.

The Danish theologian, Søren Kierkegaard, has written a book about Abraham going up to kill Isaac. In English, the title is *Fear and Trembling*. Kierkegaard struggles with the story of Abraham binding his son for sacrifice; it gives him "fear and trembling." He replays the story four times, each time adding different emotions and different outcomes. He can't seem to accept the story from the Bible. Nor can we! It gives us "fear and trembling" to imagine being Abraham, walking up to the land of Moriah, taking the wood and laying it on the altar, then taking Isaac and binding him onto the wood, then taking a knife...It makes us shudder.

But in truth, this story isn't realistic. It's not true to real life. Can you imagine being the parent? You've just lost your only other child, and now God tells you to kill your remaining child. You would be full of emotion! But in the biblical story, Abraham is absolutely calm. He expresses no emotion at all:

He rose early. He saddled his donkey, he took his son, he cut the wood, he laid it on the altar, he bound his son to the wood, he took out his knife-- and then the angel intervened and provided a ram to be sacrificed instead of Isaac—no fear throughout, no anger, no sadness, and at the end not even any joy! This can't be the story of a real father expecting to lose his son.

No! The whole story has got to be a parable. In the Book of Hebrews, when retelling the story of Abraham, the author uses the word "figuratively," which from the Greek may be translated "as in a parable." This story of Abraham must be a parable that teaches what it means to be faithful to God. Abraham is a character who is larger than life. He is an archetype of faithfulness.

If you wanted to describe the epitome of faithfulness, you might say that a person was so obedient to God that, if told to, he would even kill his own son. Abraham is the quintessential man of faith. He trusted God so much that he had confidence that everything would work out in the end. He even told the two other boys with him that he and Isaac would be coming back down *together*. He even told Isaac that God would provide a ram for the sacrifice. He didn't have "fear and trembling." He was perfect in faith—How could he have been human?

The only way I can understand this story, is to see Abraham as an ideal hero of faith. This idealized Abraham was so perfected in love for God that he was not even afraid.

This standard is so high; I doubt any of us can ever come close to reaching such a degree of trust in God, a faith that is beyond all doubt.

Kierkegaard says that human faith is full of doubt. It's not *superhuman* like Abraham's faith. It requires a "leap of faith" for us to overcome doubt.

Who of us has not had doubts about our faith? Most of us go through stages in our faith development. First we have a naïve faith. When we are young, we accept all the Bible stories as if they were history. Abraham lived to be 175 years old, it says in the Bible. (No problem, a child can accept that.) But when we become young adults, we start rejecting ideas that cannot be proven. I remember when I was in college I couldn't believe in a Virgin birth—it isn't possible—so I wouldn't say the Apostles' Creed in church. Then many of us, when we are mature adults, begin to see the stories in the Bible pointing to age-old truths. We may see that the stories are not history, but that they provide *truth* nonetheless. We can understand the Bible on different levels; one level is symbolic or metaphorical, or as in a parable.

Atheists claim faith in God is worthless; in fact, some say it is dangerous. Christopher Hitchens has written a book entitled *god is not Great*--"god" with a lower case g. The book blasts organized religion. The title is a parody on the Arabic phrase, "God is great," which Saddam Hussein wrote onto the Iraqi flag. The book, *god is not Great*, argues that "religion poisons everything." And the book cites lies, divisiveness, and violence caused by all 3 of the major monotheistic faiths of the world: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Much of the book I have to agree with. In the name of religion, particularly fundamentalist religion, much harm has been done. But I disagree with Hitchens' conclusions, that faith necessarily leads to submission, fear, and self-centered existence, or that faith should be our enemy. Hitchens says, "To 'choose' dogma and faith over doubt and experiment is to throw out the ripening vintage and to reach greedily for the Kool-Aid." I hate Kool-Aid. And I don't like sugarcoated faith.

Faith need not be an enemy; faith can be a friend---*if* our faith is open to examination. If our faith is open to scrutiny, skepticism, and even doubt, it can lead us. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is an understanding of God that gives us stability and also flexibility. These are Fred Craddock's words (a famous preacher): stability that keeps us grounded and flexibility that allows us to continue on in pilgrimage. We must be like Christ, who was faithful to God, yet a pioneer moving forward to new understandings of how to live out the Love Commandment.

In our United Methodist tradition we are urged to keep moving as we engage in a theological task. We are not required to memorize and accept dogma. No, our task is to seek understanding of our faith as it is "revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason" (*Book of Discipline* ¶104). These are John Wesley's words, the founder of our church. We are expected to be thinking Christians. We can—in fact, I feel we must—integrate science and scholarship and history and faith into our understanding of life. We

are not expected to swallow historical religious doctrine—hook, line, and sinker. We are not expected to walk around with a blindfold on!

I hope you can agree with me that this is a church where we can speak of atheism and fundamentalism from the pulpit. I hope you can agree with me that there is more than one way to understand the scriptures of our Bible—a book I call holy. I hope you can agree with me that the story of Abraham may be read as a true story, if you wish, or as a model of submission and faith. Or the story of Abraham may be read as a parable of ultimate love for God.

Should we have faith *beyond all doubt*? No.

Paul Tillich said, "Doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith." We should not have faith *beyond all doubt*. It is *love* that we need to have beyond all doubt. It is love that should be the "banner of heaven" under which we stand and live and find our meaning in life. God's love is invitational, it isn't dangerous or violent. We are invited and our response is, "Here I am." We are commanded not to exercise blind faith in any narrow religious practice, but we are commanded to use our minds and our hearts and to live in God's love for the common good.