

(God comes almost always in the unexpected.
So can we ever get to the point where we expect the unexpected?)

In the middle of the seventeenth century in England there was a great fire in the city of London. So much of everything was destroyed. When all was finally put out it was not long before it began to dawn on many that this was an opportunity to rebuild the city and make it truly a world class city. Architects and builders began to descend on London from all over. There were competitions for drawings then much like there have been for the old World Trade Center Towers space destroyed by the 9/11 attacks.

One such architect was Christopher Wren who was actually more of an astronomer and mathematician but was just so very taken with all kinds of design questions that he pursued his degree in architecture. He presented a design for Saint Paul's Cathedral which eventually was accepted. It took ten years for the design to be approved and another forty years for the great church to be built. Wren was in his thirties at the beginning and in his eighties at the end.

One of the intriguing side plots had to do with the size of the dome Wren designed. Other architects claimed that it could not be built and would not stand if built. Wren persisted and eventually built the dome. It was the largest dome of its size, free-standing, without supporting pillars, in the world at that time. What should have been a crowning achievement became something else entirely. There were other architects who had the king's ear and convinced the king that the dome, even though built, was shaky and would not last. It would have to be supported and so he ordered Sir Christopher to erect pillars of support to hold up the dome.

It was not for another hundred years, when the inside of the Cathedral was receiving a thorough house-cleaning, that it was discovered that the pillars actually never went all the way up to the edge of the dome. They stopped just short, about an inch or two. And so, what many thought were the actual support pillars were never anything but show and tell. Wren's original design had been proven true. He was vindicated from the grave. He never lived long enough to experience this. He "saluted it from afar" as it says in the Letter to the Hebrews.

Wren never gave up believing. He kept believing despite the opposition, despite the setbacks, despite the pressure to give in. He was committed. Faith and commitment are twins. They go hand-in-hand. They are not identical twins; more like fraternal twins but are conceived and born in the same moments. They go together. They are meant for each other and they complement each other.

In the Catholic tradition we call Abraham our father in faith and so he is. But his path of faith was not an easy one. It was rocky and unclear. When God first calls him Abraham is of retirement age. He is ready to pull over to the side of the road, put in park and ease out gradually at the end of his days. Instead, God calls him to pack up everybody and head for a land that God will show him. God's promise is that he will have that land as his own—he and his descendants. Only problem is that Abraham has no descendants. God says that he will take care of that too. Not only will Abraham have descendants but his descendants will be like the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore. I mean we are talking major descendants here—and Abraham is old.

But Abraham goes. He sojourns to a new land and settles there and begins to expand and spread out. He has been given the promise of a child but nothing seems to be happening so he and Sarah

talk and they decide that Abraham will have relations with her slave girl and if she conceives a child, then Sarah will have the slave girl deliver her child with Sarah straddling her from behind so that the child can be “delivered from Sarah’s loins.” Abraham and Sarah take matters into their own hands. And they are successful and they name their son Ishmael and for a dozen years they believe he is the child of God’s promise. But then Sarah conceives and everything changes. They had it wrong. Ishmael was not the promised one. He and his mother are banished and now Sarah delivers her own flesh and blood son, Isaac. Abraham and Sarah had to change midcourse and reconsider what they thought they knew for certain.

And then, when Isaac is twelve, Abraham believes that God wants him to kill his son and offer him in sacrifice to appease God. Abraham is ready to act on what he believes until God intervenes and Abraham realizes that God does not want him to kill Isaac. All throughout his life Abraham has to believe and then reconsider his belief to make sure he has it right. He is truly our father in faith because he never stops believing. But when it comes to the descendants as numerous as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore, just how much of that did Abraham live to see? One grain of sand. One flash of light. Not a seashore full of sand; not a galaxy-filled starry night. Abraham saluted from afar but does not live to see. However, God has been true to his promise. Ishmael is the father of all Arabs in the world today, between one and one-half billion people. Abraham is also the spiritual father of all Jews and Christians, another two billion people. One half of all the people on this planet trace their spiritual heritage to Abraham in less than four thousand years. Stars of the sky? Sands of the seashore? Billions of people? Yes. God has kept his promise.

God fulfills his word in a very unexpected manner to Abraham. The same to Sir Christopher Wren. God comes to those who remain faithful. It doesn’t work the other way around. It is not that God comes first and then we believe. It is that we believe and then God comes. We have to commit. Just look at the first post-resurrection appearance of Jesus. It is to Mary Magdalen who has been cured by him and who loves him so intensely but doesn’t even recognize him until he speaks her name. She is all alone when Jesus appears to her. But when Thomas is all alone Jesus doesn’t appear to him but waits until he rejoins the others. Why not? Because Thomas didn’t believe and Mary Magdalen did. Eventually he will come around. Thomas didn’t believe it was possible so when it happened he could not take it all in even though he had seen all those miracles of Jesus. None of that was enough.

My friends, God is true to his word and to his promises. God comes in unexpected ways and so, we have to be alert, on the lookout, and in places and ways other than the usual. We must be patient and not take matters into our own hands like Abraham did. We must remain true like Abraham did and Sir Christopher did and the Magdalen did. We must remain hopeful despite. Despite what? Despite the economy. Despite the anxiety all around us. Despite our dreams not yet realized. We must be prepared NOT to see all our prayers answered—here. But in our true homeland all will be answered—yes. That is what Jesus means when he says that much will be required from the one to whom much has been given. He is speaking to you and me. In this Eucharist let us pray to be true children of Abraham—in faith and in our commitments.