

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
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Genesis 15: 1-6

God of Hope, by faith we know that you created the world, and that what is seen is made by things not visible. Open our eyes to your presence among us that we may hear your word with clarity and a sureness of hope, as we follow you in all righteousness. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

“Banned Books: The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian”

Today marks the beginning of Banned Book Week, sponsored by the American Library Association. The ALA reports that so far in 2022 there have been more attempts to ban books than in 2021. And the book banners are getting organized. The Proud Boys showed up at a school board meeting in Illinois, and groups like Moms for Liberty are leading efforts as well.

Book banners are also running for school boards in some of our districts, and this should concern us. Throughout our history Presbyterians have been major advocates of public education, but these campaigns to ban books weaken education in their attempt to teach a one-sided view of history, control the larger narrative, and undermine the important work of formation that educators do and kids need. You see, some parents don't trust teachers to teach. They fear that novels about the history of racism in our country, or books about inequality will somehow erode children's faith in American institutions. But a well-rounded education is important to improving society.

But are parents' fears unfounded? Not entirely. As the Christian Century reported in May, “Written words hold great power, and books can change readers' hearts. English professor Farah Jasmine Griffin notes that many books, from the Bible to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to Elie Wiesel's *Night*, confront readers “with powerful narratives that not only tell the stories of oppressed people, but also hold the mirror up to humanity, often showing us parts of ourselves we'd rather not see.”

But friends, as Christians, we have to look at parts of ourselves we'd rather not see. It's why we confess our sins every week and turn to God for mercy. And books about difficult topics can function similarly. They can show us our failures. They can compel us to make our society more just. They can transform us into more empathetic people and more responsible citizens. And if all of that doesn't sound like something we should be doing as Christians, I don't know what does. Yet another reason to do a sermon series on banned books.

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, the book I'm covering today, opened my eyes to what it's like to grow up on a Native American reservation. And if the book is any real indication as to what life is like on "the rez", as the protagonist in our novel calls it, (and we have reason to believe it is accurate since the author grew up on a reservation) we have failed.

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian was the most-challenged book in the United States from 2010 to 2019. The book was banned and challenged from the right for profanity and sexual references, and from the left because of allegations of sexual misconduct by the author. In fact, the American Indian Youth Literature Awards which named it a best young adult novel of 2008, rescinded the award in 2018 because of those allegations.

The novel features Arnold, or "Junior", a teenage cartoonist and book worm born with multiple disabilities including encephalitis. Arnold has grown up on a reservation in Spokane, Washington. To say that life is hard on the Spokane rez doesn't begin to touch it. "My parents came from poor people who came from poor people who came from poor people," Arnold explains, "all the way back to the very first poor people." Arnold was born with 10 too many teeth, so he gets them pulled — all in a single day, because the Indian Health Service pays for major dental work only once a year. When Arnold cracks open his geometry textbook, he finds his mother's name written on the flyleaf. "My school and my tribe are so poor and sad that we have to study from the same dang books our parents studied from," Arnold says. "That is absolutely the saddest thing in the world."

Enraged, Arnold throws his geometry book across the room and accidentally hits his teacher in the head with it, which gets him suspended from school. But the targeted teacher, Mr. P., visits Arnold at home and gives him a piece of advice: Get out. Mr. P. has seen too many promising students fade year after year, beaten down by poverty and hopelessness. “The only thing you kids are being taught is how to give up,” Mr. P. says.

“The Absolutely True Diary” tracks Arnold’s year of getting out. He transfers to Reardan High School, 22 miles away, a gleaming campus full of wealthy white kids, with a computer room and chemistry labs. He’s the only Native American there — if you don’t count the school mascot.

Arnold has some real highs at his new school, but also some real lows. And on the rez he’s considered a traitor for getting out. As Arnold says: “I was half Indian in one place and half white in the other . . . It was like being Indian was my job, but it was only a part-time job. And it didn’t pay well at all.” Triumph and grief come in equal measure for Arnold. The struggle to survive in both worlds is a grind, and throughout the book, Arnold struggles with questions about community and identity. Did he do the right thing by leaving the rez? Will he ever find acceptance there again? And will he find true acceptance in the white community? These are daunting questions for anyone, but especially for a freshman in high school who left the known for the unknown.

Another person who moved from the known to the unknown is Abraham, whose story you heard Carrie read. Abraham moved to a place he knew nothing about strictly on faith. There were no warranties, no guarantees, no bonuses to lure him except that he had faith in God. Like Arnold, Abraham began the journey before he even knew the contours of the journey. By our standards, it was a pretty foolish thing to do.

Why? Because we like security, and the regularity of life as we know it, and what’s familiar and comfortable. I thought about this just the other day when I walked into Homestead High School to prep veggies for the band’s Johnny Appleseed booth. I’m never quite at home at Homestead, but if you set me down in Kirkwood High School, even 4 years later, I could still find

my way, because it was familiar after 15 years and umpteen choir, orchestra, and band concerts I attended there.

I'll be honest. Even entering my 4th year at Homestead, I still feel like a newcomer. Granted, a lot of that has to do with me and the limited time I've given to the school (and the fact that there was a pandemic in the middle of it all), but no one wants to feel like a newcomer. After 15 years and 4 kids in the Kirkwood School District, I always knew someone. So I can totally understand why we gravitate to the familiar, and how hard it must have been for Abraham, and Arnold, to pick up and move when they didn't know a soul and really didn't know where this new direction would take them.

(And) We hear in our Genesis reading how hard it was for Abraham. He complains to God that the last time he followed God, God made promises to give him children. But that hasn't happened, and he and Sarah are old. "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless?" Abraham asked. He rarely questioned God, but this time, he had had enough.

And faith is sometimes like that, isn't it? Sometimes God's promises are very hard to believe. Maybe like Abraham, you prayed for children, but none came. Or maybe you prayed for your loved one to be relieved of their pain, or illness, or cancer, and relief didn't happen. Or maybe you've prayed for a better job or future, and that didn't come to fruition.

Sometimes, faith is hard and can be riddled with doubts and questions.

But the good news is that God doesn't respond to Abraham's question with a stony cold silence. God responds with love and repeats the promise: you will have children. And then, in a moment of tender patience and care, God brings Abraham outside and says: "Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are even able to count them. So shall your descendants be."

God promises Abraham his descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky. And that turned out to be true, as Abraham and Sarah had Isaac, and Isaac had Jacob and Esau, and Jacob had twelve children that grew and multiplied into the twelve tribes of Israel. And one of those descendants,

Jesus, will declare God's grace and mercy to all the world, and be the blessing God promised so long ago.

And you know what, that story isn't done yet. Because we're now counted as children of the promise and descendants of Abraham, too. We now make up those stars in the sky God talked about so long ago.

Friends, so much of our own journey of faith asks us to step out not knowing where we're going, but still going. When Arnold's teacher in "The Absolutely True Diary" told him to leave the rez, he was scared. He didn't know if he was smart enough to make it in the new school, he risked losing his best friend, and he didn't even know if he could literally get there since his parent's car was always broken down. But something in him said, "Go anyways."

The same is true of Abraham. God didn't give him a nice set of instructions, a "divine plan" if you will, but he set out anyways. Likewise, we don't always know where God calls us to go, but we're still called to go, to begin the journey. And it occurs to me, standing here, on the day we kick off our stewardship campaign, that our foremothers and forefathers in faith probably didn't know what would happen when they started that little clapboard church, the First Presbyterian Church in Fort Wayne, 191 years ago. They were a small group, with no guarantees of what the future would hold or if they were doing the right thing. But they had faith, and persevered because of it. And here we are, all of us.

I can give you a list of reasons to make a pledge to the church: the mission work we do in the community, the arts program that is flourishing, the new members we're receiving, the nursery that is busy – all of these are signs of life that are worthy of our financial support. But one often overlooked reason to give is because the church, the people here, are present for you on the days when you don't have faith and need others to have it for you. Honestly, sometimes I wonder – how do people without a church get through the hard days? Because on the hard days, the dark days, you need those other stars in the sky to shine brightly for you. You need the church.

So . . .

When perhaps you find that faith in God's promises is easy . . . When that's true for you, come here, to your church, in order to let your faith shine as bright as a star in heaven and encourage those around you. But when faith is hard for you -- when, like Arnold, the struggle to survive is a grind -- come here, to your church, and see some of those stars scattered throughout this congregation and let them have faith for you.

God made some extraordinary promises to Abraham, and called Abraham to be and do more than he could have ever imagined. And God is not done. God is still doing that: still making promises, still calling us to be more than we'd imagined, still giving us reminders, still keeping us in faith.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Sources:

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