

First Presbyterian Church  
Cheyenne, Wyoming  
February 28, 2010  
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: Perceptions and Reality,  
Genesis 15:1–12, 17–18 , Philippians 3:17–4:1; Luke 13:31–35 .

On Friday, February 19, 2010, the golf star Tiger Woods, made a dramatic public apology for foolishly cheating on his wife and for letting so many people down. Indeed, he had sinned against God and his fellow human beings. Afterwards, the news media asked people what they thought of what Tiger said. The perceptions ranged from, “he was truly penitent” to “it was just a snow job.”

No matter what people think about Tiger’s sincerity, it is so far, a very sad story for him and his family. I pray that he will live up to his apology for the sake of his wife and children. I think Tiger was right to make a public apology, and to say that ultimately this whole matter is between his family and himself. May we let the man and his family alone to forgive, to reconcile and to heal.

Tiger spoke the truth in stating that he had to prove his words of apology with his actions. It is one thing to perceive that he is sorry for his arrogant, stupid and selfish actions, but only the reality of his behavior from here on out will make his promises to change for the good come true. Tiger said he is a Buddhist like his mother, yet the timing of his apology is also a good example of what is to happen during the Christian season of Lent as we repent of our sins, examine our lives and ask God to help us walk in his ways, again.

How words and actions are perceived, and the reality that is behind them applies not just to public figures, but to all of us. Are the good perceptions we want people to have of us backed up by a congruency of our words and actions? If we say we are Christians, and want people to perceive us as Christians, then do we behave in a manner that reflects the reality of Jesus Christ being our Lord and Savior? Would others want to follow Jesus because of what they see of him in us? If so, grand! If not, then we need to stand in the penitence line with Tiger Woods, no matter what sins we have committed. We need to acknowledge that we need God’s help to get our lives cleaned up, our actions in order and to walk in his ways.

That is enough examination of human behavior—for now. Today’s Lenten scriptures take us in “**an unexpected turn**” toward examining the words and actions of God. Is what we perceive of God’s promises congruent with the reality of God’s behavior? This was a major question on Abram’s mind in the passage from Genesis which begins “After these things.” Let us examine “these things” and put ourselves into Abram’s psyche as we follow his story. What if Abram was us? You see, in Genesis 12 “God had called Abram to leave his country and his kin in order to go to a new land with different cultures. There in that place, God had promised to bless him uniquely. God would make of Abram a great nation, and he would give to Abram and his descendants that new land where Abram would settle.” God’s words gave Abram the perception of ‘a promising beginning.’ But all of that hope and promise was followed inconveniently by real life.”

“A famine had forced Abram and his wife, Sarai to leave that Promised Land temporarily. They took refuge in Egypt, where Abram operated fearfully and deceptively. The episode resulted in a misunderstanding with the Egyptian king, and Abram was evicted from the land. Then, back in Canaan, there had been trouble, too. Strife developed between Abram’s camp and the camp of his nephew, Lot. Circumstances forced them to separate, which may have been a source of some unhappiness for Abram. To make matters worse, Lot had chosen for himself and his company the more fertile land, leaving Abram with the less attractive option. Then the city where Lot had settled was attacked and conquered in a regional skirmish. Lot, his family, and all of his possessions were part of the booty for the winning side, and they were taken away. Abram had to mobilize a large group of men for military action. They set out in pursuit of those victors, catching and defeating them, and liberating Lot and his family.”

In summary, things had been a mess so far for Abram and Sarai. In the time since they obeyed God and left their homeland in Mesopotamia, they had experienced trouble on every side. Famine, conflict, misunderstandings, family strife, battle, bloodshed — life in this new land did not seem remotely as hopeful and promising as it must have when God first called them.”

What Abram perceived as a promising beginning from God, the reality of it all had not come close to the perception. God knew this and spoke to Abram again. “God’s word to Abram was reassurance (‘Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield’). God’s word was ‘promise’ (‘Look toward the heaven and count the stars ... so shall your descendants be’), and a reaffirmation of his plan for Abram (‘To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates’).”

“We generally embrace Abram as one of the great heroes of faith in scripture, and rightly so. And yet, upon closer examination of this particular episode, it is interesting to note that Abram’s contributions to this conversation with God consist of two questions and one candid observation that borders on a complaint. There is no grand doxology or magnificat from Abram in this scene. He questions and complains” because what he perceived would come from God was not his reality. “In this conversation, we are reminded again that God is not offended by candor.” Rev. David Kalas, “Emphasis,” March 4, 2007

Instead of being angry at Abram’s candor, God reiterates his promise to a very old Abram of offspring of his own “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” **“How can anyone believe the promises of God in such a time? Nothing in the present situation provides a reason to believe.”** Have there been times or are we going through times where our perception of God’s promises to be our shield and deliverer as he promised Abram do not meet the reality we are in? Does illness, divorce, job loss, bankruptcy, family problems or other tragedies like the sudden and shocking death of our youth director, Lee Stover cause us to question God like Abram did? It is okay to do so, because as we see with Abram, it is safe to be angry with God and question him. TNIBC Vol. 1. Pg. 448.

Yet, like Abram, we must set aside our doubt, fear and anger to hear God’s response. God’s response to us may well be like his to Abram. Imagine with me what

we might hear God saying to us. “I know that what your perceptions of me and what I promised do not match your reality. Yet consider what I have brought you through so far in life. As I delivered Abram through all his troubles, so have I delivered you. And, so will I continue to deliver the family, friends and the fellow church members of Lee Stover as you miss, mourn and celebrate him. Why would I abandon you now? Consider the stars in the heavens. If I can create something like that, can I not fulfill my promises to be with and help you?”

God might continue speaking to us using today’s Gospel lesson from Luke. “Consider my Son, Jesus and how serious he was in fulfilling my plan for salvation for your sake. When he was told that Herod planned to kill him, he was angry, not because Herod was going to kill him, but that it might happen before he was finished with his ministry of ‘casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow.’ And, before he was ready to die in his timeline for the sins of the likes of corrupt kings like Herod, the disrespectful religious leaders of Jerusalem and the rest of the world. My Son, Jesus was so concerned about the people around him, that he wanted to protect them as fiercely and yet carefully as a mother hen protects her young even unto her own death. This is what Jesus did on the cross. He gave his life to fiercely protect you from the power of evil and eternal death. I raised him up on the third day to fulfill my promise of everlasting life to the world. Your perception might still be that I have abandoned you to the desperation and evil of this world, but the reality is that I have been way ahead of you to provide for your salvation. There is nothing so difficult in the present circumstances of your life, not even in your fears, doubts and grief that can prevent me from seeing my plan for your salvation through to completion.” We may at times perceive God’s absence from us, but the reality is he is with us, in fact, way ahead of us. [TNIBC](#) Vol. 1. Pg. 448.

Going back to God’s conversation with Abram, another marvelous reality came to be. A miracle occurred in this clash of Abram’s perceptions and God’s reality. “Abram believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.” Instead of punishing Abram for his condor, God gifted Abram with more faith, renewed faith in him. This is what God does for us. If our faith in him grows weak and begins to drain out of us, he gives us more. He is the source of the faith that saved Abram and the faith that saves us as we believe in his Son, Jesus Christ. Shall we join Abram in believing the Lord and being reckoned as right with God, again?

If we change our perceptions of God and see that we are a part of his reality of salvation, then we will be doing what Paul asked the Philippians to do, join him in imitating Jesus Christ who has made us citizens in the Kingdom of Heaven. It is Jesus who takes the times in our lives where we perceive we are being humiliated by our sins or even circumstances beyond our control, and turns them into his glory. He takes our times of grief and turns them in to opportunities to understand what others are going through so that we might help them find strength and hope in him. He takes our defeats and turns them into his victory for our sake and his.

The following story illustrates what imitating Jesus and being part of his glory is like in God’s reality. Our model could very well be John Wesley who founded the Methodist

Church in England in the 1800's. Hear these words from his diary. It is a study in imitating Jesus and persistence in faith despite the perceived circumstances.

"Sunday, AM, May 5

Preached in St. Anne's. Was asked not to come back anymore.

Sunday PM

Preached in St. John's. Deacons said, "Get out and stay out."

Sunday AM, May 12

Preached in St. Jude's. Can't go back there either.

Sunday AM, May 19

Preached in St. Somebody Else's. Deacons called special meeting and said I could not return.

Sunday PM

Preached on street. Kicked off street.

Sunday AM, May 26

Preached in meadow. Chased out of meadow as bull was turned loose during service.

Sunday AM, June 2

Preached out at the edge of town. Kicked off the highway.

Sunday Afternoon

Preached in a pasture. Ten thousand people came out to hear me." Imitating Jesus and being a part of God's reality is something else, isn't it? Rev. David Kalas, "Emphasis,"  
March 4, 2007

"If we were to read back through the history of our church, certain names will appear again and again. Some of them were quiet, some of them were shy. Many never called attention to themselves." Some of them are you who worship here today. "Our church would not be standing today if it were not for those who have stood firm in the faith" like Abram, and Paul through thick and thin. In response to Lee Stover's untimely death, I know you will stand strong with our youth, whose faith has been amazing to me. Thank God for those from the past and those of you now who allowed God to change your perceptions to his reality. May God in Jesus Christ keep after us to see and do things his way in response to all he has done for us.

