

The Faith of Abraham

Throughout the Bible, faith or faithfulness is held up for us as the attribute and action that brings us closest to God. Our salvation, our ability to live the abundant life in this world and the eternal life in the world to come, is linked to our ability to live with assurance in the things we hope for, to act upon our conviction in that which is not seen or, perhaps more appropriately, our conviction in the One who is not seen, our Loving Creator. An active trust in God, faithfulness, is extolled in the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament and in the writings of the prophets. In Proverbs, “A faithful person shall abound with blessings...” In Habakkuk, “the just shall live by their faith.” The great ones among God’s people are remembered for their faith in both the Old and New Testaments. The Book of Numbers records that God called Moses “faithful in all my house.” And here in the Letter to the Hebrews, we have a list of those who came before Jesus to set standards for faithfulness: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses and his parents, Joshua, Rahab, and so many more.

But chief among these exemplars, throughout the history of the Children of Israel, for Jesus, for Paul, and for the anonymous writer of Hebrews, is Abraham. It is with Abraham, the grandfather of the man who gave his name to the people of Israel, that the particularity of the calling and the promise begin; the promise that through that people all the world shall be blessed and the calling to live in such a way as to be a blessing. Abraham’s faith in the Unseen God to guide him to a new place that will be his legacy to his family and, indeed, his faith in that same God to give him a family at a ridiculous age and to preserve the larger promise even in the face of a demand for the sacrifice of the child born of the promise is the faith which set the standard not only for Israel but for all of us who have been, in Paul’s metaphor, grafted into the roots of that family of faith.

I have always felt a kinship with Abraham for his willingness to pick up and move at the behest of God. It’s a hard thing, even in the 21st century of the Common Era, to move to a new place. My dad moved his family from place to place for economic reasons, although I am certain that he, as a man of faith, sees in that his faithfulness to God through being a good provider to his family. I don’t remember my first two moves with my parents, from the little Missouri town of Herculaneum to the more bustling suburb of St. Charles or from there to Clearwater, Florida. I remember with clarity, however, the excitement of moving from Florida to England and then my heartbreak at leaving the Kentish village of Bearsted for the distant environs (it seemed to me) of Doddington in Essex, a whopping 43 miles distant. We left England for Long Island and New York for another St. Louis suburb which remained home for me until my college days. Since we were married, Connie and I have lived in Houston, Louisville, Shutesbury, MA, Houston (again), Louisville (again), Bothell, Evansville, and finally Lynnwood.

All of those moves and it never got any easier, although Connie and I did become quite proficient at the technical tasks of moving. Even though our moves were undertaken for sound reasons and, for the most part, there was a sense of calling involved, moving is tough. For one thing, there is community to be re-established. Getting to know one’s neighbors, finding schools for the kids, doctors, dentists, auto mechanics, a church – whenever we move, we have to recreate the networks of day-to-day life.

In the moves that Connie and I made or the moves that most of us have made or that Kathy is about to make, we at least could count on a few similarities from place to place. Only a few of us here today have moved to places where our native tongue was not understood. And I think for

The Faith of Abraham

all of us, we were able to move to or near a place where God was worshipped in a way we could understand, even if it was not in a way we were used to. Abraham, of course, had neither of these advantages, nor could he have much if any foreknowledge of the place to which God was sending him. Some scholars now think that Abraham must have been a merchant of sorts or at least familiar with the trade routes of the Fertile Crescent. But even if he had first-hand reports of the lay of the land and customs and language of Canaan, he certainly didn't have Google Earth to check out good places to raise a flock, or CNN to tell him where trouble might be brewing, or a bank to wire his money to, or a consulate to prepare a welcome for him. Nor would he find a church community waiting for him – as far as he knew, no one else worshipped God as he had come to know God. All he had was his faith in God.

But even with all our modern advantages, there's no doubt that moving to a new place requires a certain leap of faith. We trust to God that we will be well-received in our new home, that people will be kind and helpful, that we will find the work we have come for to be fulfilling or that we will find the work that God is calling us to. Even when we move to a place we've lived before, as Connie and I have done and as Kathy is about to do, the challenges and the faith they require in order to be met, remain. In our fast-moving world, places change quickly. Familiar businesses fold or move and new ones come in. Other people move, just as we have done. Friends with whom we expect to reconnect may now be on the other side of the country. Depending on how long we've been gone, they may have passed from this world entirely. Or circumstances in our lives and theirs may have changed us to the point that what drew us together as friends no longer holds sway. Even the churches that have supported us and fed our spirits in the past may have changed. Moving is still hard and it still requires faith.

Of course, the reality is that each of us takes another step into a foreign land each day. That foreign land is called the future and though we may think we have a pretty good idea of what each day will bring us, none of us can know the future with certainty even moments in advance. I dare say each of us here has had at least one moment of shock in our lives when we realized that much of what we'd planned was now obsolete: the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, a medical diagnosis. As a society, we had one of those moments on September 11, 2001, or at least we were told we did. In most ways, it seems to me, the United States has returned to business as usual after that tragedy. But I digress. Stepping into the future is a mark of faith no matter how secure we may think that future is. In small ways, we proclaim our faith in God when we step out of our homes in the morning. Like Abraham, we look forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

So, as I read about Abraham and his faith in God, I think about the many times in my life that God has blessed me in the difficult task of moving in response to the way I understand God's call on my life. I think of how true that is for so many of the people I know as they have sought the will of God in their own lives, regardless of whether they feel that God is calling them to a particular work or simply calling them to exercise their God-given talent and capabilities and being a blessing to their families and all those they encounter in the best way they can. And I think about how God blesses us, like Abraham, for moving boldly into the future, prepared to receive whatever God brings our way, whether it an obvious blessing or a blessing initially hidden by a challenge.

The Faith of Abraham

And when I think of Abraham, I think of how often God's blessings surprise us. Abraham, or Abram, as he was known then, is introduced to us in Genesis 11:26 as one of the sons of Terah, a descendent of Noah's son, Shem. In verse 29, we learn that he had a wife, named Sarai, later Sarah, and in verse 30, we learn that she was barren. So when we read in chapter 12 of Genesis that God promises Abram that he will make "a great nation" of him, I think it's safe to assume that Abram believed God but that it would not have occurred to him that God meant to bless him with natural children and certainly not with Sarai. He was 75 when he set out for Canaan along with his nephew Lot. He may have expected to become Lot's adopted father or to see his name perpetuated by the young man he later put in charge of his household, Eliezer of Damascus. When God insisted that he would bless Abram with offspring, Sarai decided that the only way to do this was for him to take her maid to bed so that Sarai could, as the custom was in those days, claim the child as her own. But God surprised them all and Isaac was born beyond anyone's expectations.

Now, even at the age of 52, I don't really expect God to bless me with another child. In fact, I'm not entirely sure I would count it as a blessing. But Abraham's story reminds me that God is faithful to grant what God has promised. Part of the reason that I find it possible to live in faith in God is because God keeps faith with me. That is not to say that God is like the genie in the story who grants my every wish. Far from it. For one thing, God knows far better than I do what I really need and I know myself well enough to know that I have, do and likely will wish for things I decidedly don't need. God is faithful to give me the things I do need, things that build up my spirit. And God continues to surprise me with those things that I need but didn't know I needed. God's blessings are surprising. I think about how God put Connie in my life when I wasn't looking for a girlfriend and about our three children, none of whom came at a planned or convenient time. I think of how I set out for college with a three and a half year plan for a psychology degree, to be followed immediately by three years in seminary and a pastorate. Instead, God blessed me with four and a half years at Rice, a year out of school, another four and a half years in seminary and a career in the theatre that lasted nearly 30 years. The most recent surprise was that I finally achieved that pastorate, years after I'd decided it would never happen, as Charlie Scalise can attest.

I would encourage you, my friends, whether you are thinking of God's blessings to you individually or of God's blessings on this congregation, not to discount surprises. As people who gather together each week because of our faith in God, it may be easy for us to vaguely believe that God is going to bless us somehow and won't that be nice. Our challenge is to be ready for the unexpected specific blessings that God will send our way. We must prepare ourselves for the proposition that is so wild that we fall down laughing as Abraham did. Nothing is too wild a notion for God. Remember the words of the theologian Frederick Buechner that our vocation, our calling from God, is found "where our greatest passion meets the world's greatest need." God will bless us in amazing ways when we keep both our passion and the needs of those around us in focus. Kathy, my sister, as we send you out today, we will be praying that God soon reveals to you in your new place how this will be true for you, whether it utilizes your art, your storytelling, or some other passionate interest of your spirit which is yet to flower.

As I consider Abraham today and particularly the condensed version of his story in Hebrews, I'm also struck by the phrase that his descendants were "as many as the stars of heaven and as the

The Faith of Abraham

innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.” It occurs to me that when we live lives of authentic and realized faith, our reach is wider than we think. Do you remember the movie from 2000, “Pay it Forward”? Not, in my estimation, a great film but it made a point that we all need to be reminded of from time to time. When we are kind, when we are thoughtful, when we empathize with others and take pains on their behalf, the world is changed. A single “random act of kindness” can be like a pebble dropped into a quiet pool of water, sending ripples out that touch everything in the pool. When we live with the faith that characterized Abraham, our witness to the world can be adopted, appropriated, announced, discussed, imitated, until we too have touched lives as innumerable as the grains of sand by the seashore. We should never think of our actions and words as unimportant. Each one of us touches people we cannot anticipate. We must live into that promise of God as well.

Finally, one more thing that I noticed about Abraham and the other heroes of the faith mentioned here in Hebrews. They didn’t look back. In the vernacular of the 20th century civil rights movement, they kept their eyes on the prize. Unlike the wandering Children of Israel under Moses, they didn’t look back to the fleshpots of Egypt and yearn for the good old days. Instead, they kept moving ahead, searching for that city built with foundations that they had faith lay ahead of them. They desired a better country, a heavenly one. In this way they opened themselves to the blessings of God. And so I would say to you, Kathy, my sister, as your journey takes you away from us, don’t look back but keep looking ahead. And to those of us who remain to walk together in faith as Good Shepherd Baptist Church, we can’t look back either. We can’t let ourselves be caught in the trap of thinking, “if only it was as it once was.” The truth of the matter is that God has things that are even better than the old days in store for us. All we have to do is keep living in faith.

When we live the life of faith, we are sometimes called to take chances, to take what the great Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard called “the leap of faith.” One popular definition of faith, taking off from the description in Hebrews of “the conviction of things not seen” is that faith is walking to the end of all the light you have and taking one more step. It always makes me think of a scene near the end of the movie “Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade.” Perhaps you remember it: with his father, Professor Henry Jones wounded and facing certain death, Indiana (or “Junior,” as his father reminds him) is forced to find a way across a seemingly bridgeless abyss. He must take, in his own words, a leap of faith. His father reminds him that he must believe. And so he steps out into the abyss only to find that his foot lands on a *trompe l’œil* bridge which mimics the surrounding chasm. This trope has been repeated in the most recent series of “Doctor Who.” The Doctor and his companion, Clara, must journey to the center of the TARDIS to shut down the overloaded engines but the TARDIS, a sentient machine, has in its agony set up an obstacle course to protect those same engines. Like Indiana Jones, the Doctor and Clara are confronted by a seemingly bottomless chasm. The Doctor realizes what the TARDIS has done and also that the ship will not harm him or Clara. They leap into the chasm and find themselves in the engine room. The Doctor has faith in his ship, the living machine that is his oldest friend. How much better for us that we can have faith not in some abstract notion of exploration and honor, nor even in an old friend but in the Loving Creator of All.

“They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth,” says the writer of Hebrews about his or perhaps her heroes. Pilgrims, as the old hymn puts it, in this barren land.

The Faith of Abraham

Like them, we look for the God of Abraham and Sarah to guide us, to lead us all our journey through, to deliver us. Like them, we live in faith, not putting our trust in things we can touch and see and hear and taste, as those around us too often do, but in the Invisible God, who made the world and all that is within it. As we look forward, into the future, let all that is within us bless God's holy name. Amen.