

SERMON TITLE- "The Stages Of Faith"

TEXT- Genesis 17

PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church

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Last week we met Abram on our journey through Genesis. Genesis is the book of beginnings, of course but you could also say that it is the book of foundations- the foundations of what it means to be the people of God.

We met Abram in a somewhat unusual context since it was the Sunday before Remembrance Day. We met him in the context of God's message of peace to a world of conflict. Frankly even as I prepared the sermon some of the things that Genesis described about Abram as an example of God's peace, surprised me. Abram really set a standard of how to live in peace that Jesus would explain more fully 2000 years later.

The "peace" Abram is not the one we usually meet first because it was another quality of Abram that he is specifically famous for. That quality is described in Romans-

Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it . . . may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring . . . to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. Romans 4:16

That verse and others like it in the NT establish several points-

1. We are Abraham's lineage
2. We have Abraham's promise
3. Abraham's faith is the basis of everything

That begs a very important question- What is "faith"? That is a question that has intrigued God's people since the beginning of time.

Jesus talked a great deal about faith and its importance. In fact some of His statements perplexed His followers-

I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." Matthew 17:20

That is a radical claim and begged many further questions- which Jesus of course invited. At first the disciples simply answered-

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" Luke 17:5

Over time the question of what faith is was explained to the church. The most succinct definition comes in the book of Hebrews- **Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. Hebrews 11:1-2**

What is faith? it is having the assurance of something that we cannot see. Specifically Christian faith is- believing God- believing that what He said- He will do.

The writer of Hebrews then proceeds to give his examples of faith- all of which are drawn from Genesis. We will track our way through them. It is the story of faith.

By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead. Hebrews 11:3-4

By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; he could not be found, because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. 6And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. Hebrews 11:5-6

By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith. Hebrews 11:7

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with

him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. Hebrews 11:8-10

By faith Abraham, even though he was past age—and Sarah herself was barren—was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore. Hebrews 11:11-12

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Hebrews 11:13-15

Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. Hebrews 11:16

Hebrews 11 is the “faith” chapter of the Bible. I think it is beautiful, powerful and frankly overwhelming. But for today, let’s not be overwhelmed but rather do our work in Genesis to understand what it is about Abram that makes him foundational in the matter of faith.

Before we go on we first need to clear up a couple of serious misconceptions-

#1. Faith is NOT a magic bullet to get what we want

This is a terrible but predictable view of faith. When we face challenges we look for tools to overcome those challenges. That is a natural, normal reaction. In fact it is both natural and normal to try anything that might work.

At first, when people read the NT it looks like faith is the magic bullet to solve all the problems we have. After all if faith gives us the power to tear mountains from their foundations and have them thrown into the sea- surely it should be able to solve smaller problems like taking away a headache, or even cancer.

It is also both natural and normal that people will try to market this proposed magic bullet- and they do. I don’t spend much time watching “Christian” TV but the other day I did and was horrified by what I saw- preachers prancing up and down stages claiming to have captured the magic bullet of faith. Invariably accessing that power involved sending someone money.

It is frankly, obscene and I came away from watching those shows convinced that simply ignoring them is not good enough. People need to be warned. They are doing in Christianity the same thing that scam artists do in the medical world- making bizarre claims in order to extract money from unsuspecting people. Real doctors can’t simply ignore them- they need to stand up and say- “That is wrong!”

The writer of Hebrews could not be clear- the heroes of faith “did not receive the things promised” contrary to what the TV hucksters claim. There was a promise that they accessed- but not in the way that we want to interpret when we are in need of a cure.

Faith is not a magic bullet that we use to access the power of the universe or God- but there is another important NOT about faith. **#2. Faith is NOT a leap in the dark**

Now this is also a response to a natural and normal interpretation of faith. The most famous modern version of this came from a writer called Kierkegaard who said that faith is like stepping off a cliff into a dark place- based on obedience to a command. Now there is a basis for this in that there are times when we do have to step into the unknown. There are lots of great stories of children having to trust their parents and step into space trusting that their parent will catch them.

But that story by itself- translated into the image of stepping off a cliff isn’t an appropriate image of Biblical faith.

But the story of parent and child does lead to a good foundation for what faith is-

#3. Faith is part of a relationship

This is not controversial but does provide the foundation from which to understand what faith is and why we need to understand Abram’s story.

The story of Abram is the story of the faith journey of a man who is known for his faith- and we are going to go on that journey with him.

The question is- what are the stages of this journey?

It began where we began last week-

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation . . . and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. So Abram left, as the LORD had told him . . ." Genesis 12:1-4

STAGE #1 First Love

The story of Abram begins with a new beginning. Abram leaves for a whole new life. That is still the story of God's people- it is the story of leaving behind an old way of living and embarking on a new journey.

The first stage of this journey does not begin with God talking to Abram- it begins with Abram's action in "leaving."

I think almost everyone would agree that this is very exciting. This is not the desperate journey of a refugee leaving a safe world for the dangerous unknown- it is the journey of the conquest of new territories. For some of us it is an "Aha" moment that marks off the beginning of this stage.

Those who remember the early days should be thinking about how exciting life was then. If you are still living in them- enjoy it. It is exciting. It is the season of first love. It is the season of dreams of the amazing promise that life offers. There are no limits to it. When God spoke to Abram it was of becoming a "great nation" and of a future that looked far beyond his own life. "All the peoples on earth" would be blessed through Abram.

The new life doesn't get much more exciting than that.

That is where the faith journey begins- it begins with the knowledge that life is far more than just solving the problem of the hour- it is about the Kingdom of God.

As we get older we can tend to have a somewhat deprecating view of that stage of life. "Oh get over it already!" those of us who are more seasoned, say and think. The bouncing excitement of a young puppy can simply annoy us. We can hardly wait till the grind of life knocks some sense into that senseless exuberance.

That is not the Kingdom way, however. The challenge of that cynical view of first love coming in Revelation 2-

. . . I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Revelation 2:4

The message is simple- first love is first love- but this is not a stage we are to merely grow through. In fact there is something about that first love aspect of our journey that we are to nurture. And we are never to despise or look down on those who experience the joy of it.

The first love is a foreshadowing of the Kingdom of God.

But there is another Kingdom reality as well. After that exhilarating beginning life ticks on. The years go by- the seasons change and that great new life becomes regular life. There are those who deprecate this as well. In their view- the intensity of the first love needs to continue 24/7 and the day to day rhythm of life is 2nd best.

That too is a serious error. Nothing could be further from the truth. The vision of the Kingdom of God is also a vision of a life with predictable rhythms.

And Abram has this he has a relationship with God that sustains him through the journey he is on. There are days however when this life just becomes ordinary.

For those who truly understand this, there are also days when we realize how fortunate we are to be in this new life. It was during one of these later days, in the context of a good new life that God spoke to Abram again-

. . . the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." Genesis 15:1

Abram's life was very good. There was almost nothing in Abram's world that he could possibly complain about. He was successful. He had experienced God Himself and a shield and God Himself as a great reward.

BUT Abram also remembered the thrill and dreams and promises of the early days. He remembered that had been told that he would be a great nation that would carry on into the distant future.

Great promise but there was a problem.

But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless . . . You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir." Genesis 15:2-3

To become a nation meant having children- and Abram was childless and his biological clock was ticking. Most likely he was now in his 80s.

And Abram had to face something that seems to be the opposite of faith- doubt.

STAGE #2 Faith Deals With Doubt

There are those who think doubt is the enemy of faith. It comes from the view of faith as some kind of a possession that some people have and some people don't and that if you have it, it is a badge that you wear.

But that is not the case. Doubt is a part of healthy life. In fact I think that doubt, like another "enemy," pain, is very important and that those who don't have either of these 2 senses are the ones who are handicapped.

What is doubt? It is the appropriate response when what we thought we understood turns out to be different.

Relationships cannot move forward if there is not change and growth and that change and growth comes when we learn things we didn't know.

Abram had a very good question to ask God and he asked it. That asking is extremely important and Biblical faith is about asking the questions we have and asking that question to the right people.

In fact it is relationships, in which asking appropriate questions is out of bounds, that are not healthy.

At 80 years of age, asking when the part of the promise that involves children will start to kick in- is the most natural question I could imagine.

Now it is important to add- we don't always get the answers we want but in this case God answers Abram's question-

Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Genesis 15:4-5

God answered Abram's question. In this case the answer was not, a child appearing before Abram- but simply God's assurance that indeed he would have a son. Sometime questions have answers that are easy to understand- sometimes, as we will see by the next question Abram asks, the answers are not easy to understand.

By believing God's promise, a promise that came as part of the conversation, Abram took his relationship with God to the next level- a level that is noted in a verse that the NT writers used as their faith foundation.

Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness. Genesis 15:6

Before we go on to the next stage of faith it is important to see the conversation that follows this.

He also said to him, "I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it."

But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?" Genesis 15:7-8

Right after that big moment in Abram's encounter with God- a moment that is marked with that great declaration of the relationship, God carries on with the other part of his promise- the promise of an actual land. This answer was to prove far more difficult and that difficult hangs over us to this day.

And what is Abram's response? He wants assurance. You would think that at that moment that God's simple word would be enough. But Abram wants proof.

We are moving on at this point but I think it is important to note that asking good questions is good- even in awesome moments- and the proof of it is that in response to this question God meets Abram in a particularly powerful way. That's all for now on that point, however.

Faith is about asking questions, and asking more questions- and carefully listening to the answers.

But there is one more feature of faith that Abram illustrated as he walked with God. That is illustrated by what happens next.

Abram has been assured of the fact that a child of his will be the beginning of a great nation.

The problem is Abram is getting on in years, Sarai his wife is getting on in years- and there is no child on the horizon. So Abram and Sarai start thinking about solutions to help get this promise fulfilled.

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar; so she said to Abram, "The LORD has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her." Abram agreed to what Sarai said. So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years . . . he slept with Hagar, and she conceived. Genesis 16:1-4

It's pretty hard to fault Abram and Sarai for this ingenious solution. It's called surrogate motherhood and it was pretty common in that day. It certainly wasn't seen as immoral.

The plan worked like a charm and now Abram would have a son.

So what's the faith lesson in that? It is not that God needs us to be creative in helping Him get the job done- although that in itself is a good thing.

The faith lesson is-

#STAGE 3 Faith Survives Detours

The best that can be said of Abram and Sarai's plan was that it was a detour. This was their plan- it was not to be the route through which God would fulfill His promise to Abram. In fact this scheme set in motion a lot of confusion and all kinds of levels.

The reality of our faith journeys, however is that we do this sort of thing all the time. We chase all kinds of rabbit trails- some worse, some better. The bottom line, however is that faith is not derailed by detours. If it would be- we would all be doomed.

What was it about Abram, however that helped his faith survive the detour? I believe it was the determination to hang onto the knowledge that God is bigger than our schemes. This meant that when it came time to admit that he and Sarai had taken a detour- he did not keep going headlong down the road to disaster- but rather stopped and reassessed.

We will create disasters for ourselves and those around us. Sometimes those disasters are simple mistakes. As you know, I had a motorcycle accident. Although I don't remember what happened- it was almost certainly an error of judgment on my part. The accident

happened- now the only question I have to face is- what will I do next? Will I make things better or worse given this fact.

I am very thankful that this time, the disaster I created was truly and accident and not even the result of recklessness BUT I have been both reckless and malicious enough times in my life to be very mindful of the fact that sometimes the decisions I make- out of bad places can lead to disasters.

If that were the case the same principle would apply- am I able to face the facts of what happened and reassess what I am doing and from the place I find myself make the best decision possible? Will I stubbornly carry on a disastrous course?

Abram, at the end of a long life with many detours knew that God's ways are God's ways and that our ways are our ways.

And the result of knowing this means that God can direct to His way- not matter where we find ourselves.

This knowledge is, I believe, one of the great faith treasures that God gives His people and for me gives a reason why- Hebrews 11:1 is such a powerful description of faith-

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. Hebrews 11:1-2

That is the faith of Abram that we are to emulate.