

Sermon Text for August 30, 2015

by

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Luke 12:32-34, Genesis 15:1-6

“Standing on the promises of God”

Some years back I walked through a furniture plant call Florida Furniture because the founder and the owner was a member of our church. I watched from beginning to end the process of making a bed-side table, learned that it was actually called a commode. I was watching them go down the line and I noticed that they had little scuff marks on all of the doors. I hated to be the bearer of bad news but I reached over and told the owner: I think you have a bad roller or something because there are scuff marks on all of the doors. He just looked at me and shook his head and said that those were distress marks, we put them there on purpose because when they become antiques they become more valuable with those marks.

The idea of distressing something on purpose to give it more value struck me as a bit odd and somewhat sadistic, but I went home that day and our kids were small and I realized that we had very, very valuable furniture because all of it had an inordinate amount of distress marks.

When we apply that thought to our relationship with God there is a bit of a distressing truth. That which has been scuffed, that which has experienced pain and suffering is more valuable. You’ve heard the phrase, trial by fire. In many ways our faith, especially if it has seen the fires of trials and tribulations, become more valuable. Scripture is full of those statements. Jesus says blessed are you if you are persecuted for the sake of the kingdom of God. Paul says that we should rejoice in our trials.

We continue to follow Abraham and today we find him a bit distressed, he feels that he is being tested and put under trial. But in the midst of this trial we find Abraham again becomes a model of faith. We are going to look at faith today. This Scripture in Genesis needs to be underlined, earmarked, red-painted anything you do to get your attention because it is absolutely crucial, this Scripture is, to the New Testament in general and Paul in particular in his understanding of one being saved by faith. Luther

and others used this Scripture during the reformation as they would insist that sola fide, only by faith are we saved. Abraham shows us today what it really means to trust in the promises of God by faith. In short to stand on the promises of God.

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We have two very different Scriptures today. Let's look at Luke first today. If our premise is standing on the promises of God, these verses begin with a strong promise: God will give you the kingdom. But in order to appreciate it you may have to go through something which is distressing. Sell your possessions, place your treasure in heaven because where you place your faith, there your heart will be. Is it not in times of distress that we discover what is important to us?

The volatility of the stock market this past week doesn't affect all of us, but I'm guess that those that are living on a fixed income, we get quite nervous when it loses 1,000 points. For those who live pay check to pay check the stock market doesn't really come into play. But for those who rely upon it this past week was scary, wasn't it? We've been through it before. The amount of reliance we place upon our markets are not divorced from our daily bread. We need the stock market to do well.

This is what Jesus addresses with his disciples. We do place a lot of trust in our financial well being. It does obsess us and cause us to be anxious, nervous, it can also invade our thoughts. Jesus knew this and it is why he encourages us to place our treasure in heaven. If money monopolizes our thoughts then it is better if we sell it all and give to the poor, then in our lives God won't have the competition.

Today with Abraham we will learn what it means to have faith in God especially when things are not quite going as we have planned. It is hard to put our trust in God and his promises if over a period of time you aren't seeing any results and you start to wonder if God has heard you at all. It is hard to trust in God's promises when you every single day another person is shot on camera, another truck full of immigrants is found with bodies decomposing. One of the members of our church in Moscow described her journey from the Congo to Russia and mentioned that there 5 five stops along the way and at each of those stops, to leave Africa, to leave Asia, to leave the Middle East, to arrive in Russia, to be allowed to go into Moscow there was a different man there who

raped her. The life of an immigrant relies upon putting your life in the hands of others, others whose only intent is money or worse.

Trusting in God's promises means that we have to have faith and it is through faith that we can come to believe and rely upon God for all things. I think we all believe in God, there is not a doubt in my mind that we believe in God, but do we believe God? This is where the rub comes. Skip ahead if you would to vs. 6 and we find that Abraham believed God, which means he believed the promises. There is a tremendous difference between believing in God and believing God. Believing God is reliance upon God, trusting God, allowing God to run the show. Jesus states that even the demons believe there is a God, even they believe in God, but they shudder to think about it. Faith is being able to trust God's future and to live assured of that future even in the deathly, uncertain present. So a couple of questions you need to ask yourselves today: what difference do the events in the world around me make in my faith in God, and one that follows it: do we merely believe in God or do we believe God and all the promises that he makes to us. I am convinced that the two are related.

Abraham was one who had the faith that he could trust in the promises of God that they would change his life time and time again. In our Scripture we find God who approaches Abraham at the zenith of his career. He is wealthy, he has just finished a battle that he won 4 against 5 and in this Scripture we find that God makes a promise to him: Do not be afraid, Abraham I am your shield, your reward shall be very great. He finds himself at the peak of the stock market. Abraham hears the offer and counters it with a complaint or a reason why his promise, his offer doesn't sit right with him.

From the first promise of God years ago and thousands of miles later Abraham had gone and did everything that God had promised and well now its time for God to deliver. Abraham had done his part and he protests and says what about your promise, I am childless and is someone outside of my own family going to get all of this that I've worked hard for? Abraham has good reason to object and even complain because God so far has not followed through and his biological clock is ticking.

God makes another promise. Finally, these verses that follow reflect the faith of Abraham and the amazing faithfulness of God. This is where it all comes together after

God takes him outside, shows him the stars and says don't worry. Look at the stars, see what I've done if you can count them then you know thus shall be your descendants.

When in your life can you remember seeing the stars clearer than you ever have? They just kind of all pile up one on top of another and they are impossible to count. I remember one summer evening driving down the road in Honduras in the middle of nowhere and I looked up and I didn't see stars but rather bunches, and clusters of bright dots of light, masses of shining lights. If you've ever been to a place and seen the stars where there are so many that the constellations themselves are drowned out, that is what Abraham saw and it all of a sudden clicked in him, if God has done this, of course he can give me a family.

Now this realization for Abraham did not come at a time of visible distress. But Abraham must have been going through something for him to hear: "Do not be afraid, I am your shield." What a statement. If you are afraid for your life, I will protect you. But Abraham had everything he needed, except for the thing that was promised him by God, and what he wanted most, a son, an heir. After seeing the stars and realizing what God had done, that was his moment. He once again believes God's promises he remembers all that God has done and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness. This is how God works with us and gives us faith in our lives.

God gives us the offer, he doesn't force us to follow him, it has to be of our own free will, we can't make deals with God and God certainly doesn't make deals with us. Just like in creation he created and left it up to us to obey. God gave us his promise: I will give you my kingdom. I will give you offspring, I will give you what you need to survive. At times you will suffer and through that your faith will be honed. There will be times when you will need to believe God more because believing in God is never enough. I will care for you, now it is up to us to allow God to care for us. God reached out his hand from the cross, it is up to us to take, completely and allow our faith, a gift from God, to lead our way.

Why does Abraham go from protest to response? Because Abraham believed the promises of God and believed God. Our faith is not our own but rather a miracle in itself from God. God responds in generosity to those who trust in him. Hebrews 11:1 states that faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen.

Abraham hoped for a line of descendants and at that moment he was convicted that it would come.

God's gracious action on the cross precedes anything that we do. The invitation to join him, comes first, without that invitation we are lost. Christ's death on the cross extends the invitation, and his resurrection confirms it. My prayer is that we will stand on the promises of God even as we receive our distress marks in this life and that we will believe him when he says: I will be your shield. Trust me. Amen.