

Sermon Text for March 19, 2017

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Genesis 22:9-14, Romans 4:16-25

“Whose faith is it anyway?”

It was a week to take heart and be encouraged here at First Presbyterian. The confirmation class of 2017 was examined by session and were approved for membership. It always almost takes my breath away to see a child baptized in this church get to the age where she is declaring before the world that Jesus is her savior. Session approved the job description for a single full time youth director and a part-time children’s ministry director. The faith of our mothers and fathers passed down through the generations is important to us. Kelly Johnson is going to be getting married in the fall, someone who was baptized and confirmed in this church. We celebrated the resurrection of Gary Myers and Albert Herr over this past week, the culmination of the faith of a lifetime.

Each of these is a demonstration of a faith that we want to pass down from generation to generation, something that we here at the church consider as our primary responsibility. It is our goal to make everyone mature in Jesus Christ, everyone. Where are you on the continuum of your faith? We all have had a different journey which brings us to worship here on this Sunday. You know my journey, the son of missionaries whose grandparents on both sides were pastors and missionaries and seminary professors. I turned my back on the Christian faith because it was not for me and it certainly was not mine. I needed something uniquely mine. That’s when the Holy Spirit grabbed my life January 14, 1986. That was the point when the faith gifted to me by Christ became my own.

When did your faith become your own? Confirmation? Not for me, I was confirmed but it was more a religious rite than it was a time when I understood much about making it my own. Your wedding, when you hear that the two become one and it is not just a physical concept but a spiritual one as well. Paul in our second reading this morning encourages us to have a faith which is defined by a trust in the future built around knowing that God has all things under his control. What does that look like? Paul tells us that even when something seems impossible, when you trust in God your faith allows the impossible to seem ordinary, as long as it is God who has promised it. Let’s read.

READ SCRIPTURE

In our first Scripture we read about Father Abraham, the one where our faith all began. He is the father of all monotheistic religions. You know that our Muslim brothers and sisters as well as our Jewish brothers and sisters see Abraham in the same manner in which we do. It is

through Abraham that God's grace is able to be realized not only for him, but for his generations to come and through him we have the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ. Abraham is a big deal.

This Scripture that we read this morning is a big deal. It is normally called the sacrifice of Isaac, it should be the attempted sacrifice of Isaac. The road that Abraham took to get to the point where he even had a son is well known. The faith that it took Abraham to claim that what God was saying was actually going to happen, that he was going to have a son, and believe and trust in the promises of God that they would be realized. And then to find himself in the position in which he is today with the faith to take this son and sacrifice him simply because he had the faith that God could make even this work.

How different would our life look if we had the faith of Abraham? But he wasn't perfect. Remember Abraham, he was the one who wanted to take things into his own hands so decided that not his wife, but his servant would bear his son. That wasn't God's plan. He is in a different place today, his faith has been honed over time, he believes God today. He is willing to put his future into God's hands by being willing to sacrifice his son, who was his future.

Paul speaks today about our faith and how we are able to claim it as our own. Turn with me if you will to Romans 4. When I first read through this Scripture today it may have sounded like a lot of words that weren't necessarily easy to understand. Let's try to understand them today. Let's try to claim our faith today.

Paul tells us that Abraham is the origin of God's promise of grace to humanity. With Abraham something new begins. We see that it is from Abraham that a promise of a new covenant is established, not only the one created with Abraham, but the one created in Jesus Christ who can claim Abraham as an ancestor. Paul agrees with our previous statement that Abraham was a big deal. He contributes so much to our current understanding of who God is. We are the ones as vs.16 states that who share the faith of Abraham. For Paul you can't understand God's amazing grace without Abraham.

But what was different about Abraham and his relationship with God was that his relationship with God was not based on Abraham doing the right thing, but rather on grace. That wasn't always the case. What happened when Adam and Eve did the wrong thing? They got kicked out of the garden. What happened when the people in the time of Noah were disobedient to God? God destroyed them and only kept the righteous one, Noah.

But with Abraham, and this is what makes him different according to Paul, it is in his story where we see that our trust in God can never be misplaced. Our trust in God, our faith in God is demonstrated in the birth of Isaac, born to an impossibly old father and mother. In vs. 17 where we read he gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. That

simply proves that God can create whatever he may need in order to fulfill his promises, even if that means creating something where before nothing at all had existed. Hope that such a God will fulfill his promises can therefore never prove unfounded, even when all appearances go against it.

What does faith look like? It means not to waiver in that trust for the future even when the whole of visible reality seems to point to the foolishness of such a trust. That's faith. A part of that is giving God room to work, to fulfill his promises. No step forward means no desire to see God work miracles. That is such an important concept for us as people of faith. I was so pleased when Phil Skottie came that he spoke about the social ministries which were a part of the life of the Moscow Protestant Chaplaincy. I hope I don't talk too much about that church. But we did things there simply because we were not afraid to take risks and we were not afraid of the what ifs. There will always be more reasons why you can't do something than for why you can.

Throughout Scripture you read about the prophets who bemoan the fact that the Israelites have little faith. The prophet Hosea in chapter 6 speaks about the faithfulness of God and how we can trust in a God who is as reliable as a spring rain, or for us a snowfall. But in vs.1-2 we see that religious traditions do not take the place of a faith that is unwavering when confronted with the shocking realities of life.

He goes on to say in vs.4, what am I going to do with you? Your faith is like the dew or a morning mist. It is there and present but when pressed up against the heat of the morning sun, with just a little bit of heat, it disappears. In Hosea's time the people did not trust in God. Abraham was a good counter to that in the Scriptural example which he set. The church of Rome was commended by Paul for their faith. How are we doing?

What does it look like to have faith today in the 21st century? What is it like to be a disciple of Jesus Christ and have the sort of faith that you are faced with the impossible and yet you are not afraid. That you have enough awe of God that you are not afraid of the future. This is the faith that is required of us. Jesus actually gives us an example of what our faith ought to look like. Turn to Mark 8:34-38. Read.

Claiming our faith is not just for the confirmation kids. It may even be more important for those of us who have been faithful for years, even for generations. Paul's message of encouragement is that our faith would be where just as vs.21 tells us that we would be fully convinced that God is able to do what he has promised. Let's live our life that way.