

“HIS TWO SONS”

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This is a sermon about Abraham, whose story is found in the Book of Genesis.

But I start with a quote from the eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews, a book of the New Testament. I do this, because I think the author of Hebrews gets it. He understands what the Old Testament stories are really all about and he tells us what to look for. I have edited the passage but I think I have preserved the main point of it. Listen:

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ²Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval...By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain’s...By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death...By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household...By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise...By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old...By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac.

*By faith Isaac...By faith Jacob...By faith Joseph...By faith Moses...By faith Rahab...And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— ³³who **through faith** conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.”*

This is the story Abraham, the founding father of the world’s three greatest religions – Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. It is the story of his calling, his journey, his trials, his victories. It is the story of a man who lived by faith and showed us how we, too, can live by faith if we choose.

OUT OF BABYLON

The story of the Jews as a united people begins and, to a degree, ends in Babylon.

You will recall that these stories we are exploring – the ones in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible – are being cobbled together from oral tradition during the Babylonian Captivity of the Hebrew people. In 586 BCE the leaders of Israel were taken with their families and forced to live in the city of Babylon. They were expected to assimilate, to become like their Chaldean hosts and, to a great extent, they did.

What with all this successful assimilation, however, there is a fear that they will lose their identity, their history, their unique myths that makes them who they are. So they began collecting these stories and writing them down in something like a chronological order. This process would continue for nearly two hundred years, editing and perfecting the stories.

It is no surprise that, since the writing started in the Fertile Crescent between the Tigris and Euphrates, that’s where the stories themselves begin. It is where Eden is set and it is where, when the people leave Eden and travel east, the first city is built – Babel, which becomes Babylon.

And it should, therefore, be no surprise to us that the man who will become the founder of our faith comes from this same area, a city called Ur, on the Euphrates River, about 100 miles east of Babylon.

His name is Abram and his wife’s name is Sarai who live with Abram’s parents. One day his father, Terah, says that it’s time to move. He’s heard of this place called Canaan, a land rich and fertile and, because it’s getting so crowded in Chaldea, he wants to move his family there. They pack everything up and they get about half way, to a place called Haran, just north of Canaan and it looks pretty good, so that’s where they stop.

They are successful in Haran, their tribe grows, their herds grow. Their parents get old and die and are buried there and then, one day, when Abram is seventy five years old – I said, seventy five years old – the Lord, God, comes to him and say, “Abram, pack up all your stuff and your family and your people and start walking south. I’ll tell you when to stop.” And here’s the amazing thing: He does! He hears the word of the Lord and that is all he needs. By goes by faith.

They get to Canaan, which is occupied by the Canaanites, and God says, one of these days I’m going to give this all to your progeny which, by the way, will be many and it will all be theirs. But, for now, go down to Bethel and make your camp there for a while.

Things went pretty well for them in the Negev near Bethel, but after a while a famine came and they were forced to go to Egypt to survive and, there, they continued to prosper. Eventually, they come back to Canaan and they settle in an area called Hebron where, surprise, they prosper.

In fact, they prosper so much that the land can’t support all their cattle and sheep and they have to split up. Abram takes part of the tribe and stays in Canaan and his nephew, Lot, takes the other half of the tribe and settles in the area we call the West Bank of the Jordan River where there are cities, namely Sodom and Gomorrah.

By faith they came, by faith they settled, by faith they prospered.

RICH, NO KIDS

Only they didn't prosper in the way they wanted to. They were rich, they were powerful – at one point they raised an army to aid Sodom and Gomorrah in battle and to ransom their kings from invaders – they had everything that most people would want except one thing. Abram and Sarai were still childless and they had pretty much given up hope of having children. In his will, Abram had left everything to his servants and his nephew.

One day, in Chapter 15 of Genesis, Abram is moping around and God comes to him and kinda puts his arm around his shoulder and says, "Hey, cheer up, old buddy. I'm not going to let anything bad happen to you. I'm your shield. Haven't I done alright by you up to now?"

Abram allows that God has done okay, but then he takes a deep breath and opens his heart to God. "Look," he says. "All this is good and everything. I'm not complaining about the cattle or the money or anything like that. It's just that you keep saying that I'm going to be the founder of a great nation and, well, we still don't have any kids and, hey, we're not getting any younger, here."

God thinks about this for a minute and then he shows Abram a vision. First he takes him outside and says, "Look up at the stars. Okay, now count them. That's the way it's going to be with your descendants. More than can be counted."

And here's the amazing thing. Abram believed him. Abram said, okay, if you say so.

Verse 6 we are told, "**And he had faith in what God told him and God counted his faith as righteousness.**"

Abram conveys the contents of this conversation to Sarai whose response is what you might expect from a seventy five year old woman, "Yeah, we'll see."

In fact, her skepticism seems to be well placed. Twenty five more years pass and, nothing. No kids. She and Abram are nearly a hundred years old and God hasn't kept his promise. Yet.

Then it occurs to Sarai – Wait a minute. God said that our descendants would carry Abram's blood but he didn't say anything about my blood. What if Abram is supposed to father this nation by another woman? So, one day, she shares this notion with her husband. Then she says, "I have this cute little maid whose name is Haggar and she's Egyptian and kinda sassy but I think she'd be willing if you wanted to father a son with her. Maybe that's how God intends for you to father a nation. You never know with God. He's kinda inscrutable."

Abram, who loves Sarai, is reluctant at first but then he finally agrees and before long Haggar is pregnant and Abram is all excited and Haggar is lording it over Sarai and being sassy and disobedient and even disrespectful to her mistress.

Sarai goes to Abram and reports this to him. "You're being so solicitous to her and so excited about this baby that she's thinks she can be disrespectful to me." Abram says, "She's your servant. Deal with her as you see fit."

So Sarai turns the tables and she's so mean to Haggar that Haggar takes her new baby, Ishmael, and runs away, but she runs the wrong way, into the desert where she nearly dies and is rescued by an angel from God who guides her to an oasis. He revives her and tells her to go back to her mistress and everything will be okay. And she does and it is.

The writer then tells us that Ishmael will grow up to be the father of the Arabian race and, because of his questionable heritage, his race will be a contentious one, always at odds with everyone around them.

God makes another appearance in chapter 17. He tells Abram that he should be patient, that he and Sarai will have a son about this time next year. Abram thinks this is a hoot as he is a hundred years old, now, and Sarai is ninety and he literally falls on his face, laughing. God also tells him that they should change their names to Abraham and Sarah, Hebrew names, and he gives them a sign that will mark them as members of the Hebrew tribe – circumcision – which, we can imagine, brings an abrupt halt to all the laughter.

Chapter eighteen is one of my favorite stories in all of the Old Testament and it is two stories, really, in one setting.

GOD IN THREE PERSONS

One day Abraham is sitting in the door of his tent, resting in the heat of the day, when he sees three guys walking by. The story teller has already told us that this is a story about God visiting Abraham so we know that this is either God in the form of three men, or these are emissaries from God.

He sees them walking in the heat of the day and is concerned for their wellbeing so he runs to them and bids them come and have a drink of water and sit with him in a cool place. He also asks Sarah to fix them something to eat. They agree and, in the course of the meal one of the men says that he is planning to come back that way again in about a year and that Sarah will be pregnant by that time.

Sarah overhears this conversation from inside the tent and she laughs because she's nearly 100 years old. "Me? Pregnant? As old as I am and with a husband even older? Give me a break."

The three men get up to leave. Abraham and Sarah rise to see them off and one of the men says, "So, Sarah, what's so funny? Why did you laugh? Do you think that helping an old woman get pregnant isn't part of God's skill set?"

Sarah is kind of taken back by the question and she says, "Uh, I didn't laugh."

He looks at her and at Abraham and back at her and says, "Uh, yeah, you did."

Abraham walks with them for a little and as they go he realizes that they aren't just any three men. They are, in fact, the Lord God. They tell Abraham that they have some business in Sodom and Gomorrah but that it doesn't have anything to do with him so he should go on back and not concern himself with it.

Not satisfied, Abraham asks what the business is and God tells him, "The victims of these two evil cities are too many and their distresses are overwhelming me. I've had enough. I've given them enough chances. I'm going to destroy the cities."

Abraham is appalled. So appalled is he, in fact, that he runs around and stands in front of the men and won't let them pass. He bars God's path, can you imagine?

"Wait a minute," he says. "You're going to destroy everyone? Good and bad alike? What if there are fifty good people in those cities. Would you destroy the fifty good just to punish the evil ones?"

God says, "If there are fifty good people I will spare the cities."

Now this is the fun part. Abraham starts haggling with God. "What if there are forty five?"

"Okay, if there are forty five good people I'll spare the cities."

"What about forty?"

(Sigh) "Fine. I'll spare the city for forty."

"Thirty?"

"Okay, sure. Thirty. Now can I please get by?"

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to be a pest. But what about twenty?"

"Twenty, fine."

"Oh, great. Twenty is great. Last time. Ten?"

(Long Pause.) "For the sake of ten, I will not destroy the city."

And, with that, God leaves and Abraham gets his way.

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah follows, here, and we're going to deal with that story next Sunday. Today, we're going to skip ahead to chapter 21. Here God finally keeps his promise, Sarah gets pregnant and, at the age of 100 (Abraham is 110) she has a son.

When he is born she is so happy that she can't stop laughing. As she laughs, she remembers how Abraham, when he was told he would be a father, nearly thirty years ago, fell on his face, laughing. And she remembers how, when the three strangers predicted her pregnancy, she laughed and the one stranger heard her.

So, naturally, she names her son, Isaac, which means, "laughter."

Because Isaac is the heir and clearly Abraham and Sarah's favorite, they treat him better than Ishmael so, predictably, the half-brothers do not get along. So contentious is their relationship that Sarah comes to Abraham and says they are going to have to fire Hagar and send her away.

Again, Abraham is reluctant to deal harshly with Hagar and Ishmael. He has already asked God to protect Ishmael and God has agreed, so God comes to Abraham and tells him not to worry about it. Do as Sarah says, he tells Abraham, and I'll take care of Hagar and Ishmael. He will become the father of a great nation.

So Abraham packs up Hagar and Ishmael and sends them away. They go into the desert and, once again, are on the very edge of dying from dehydration when God rescues them with through an angel and a well or oasis. Ishmael goes on to marry a nice Egyptian girl and they live in the desert where he becomes a skilled archer and an expert in desert survival.

Issac will grow up under the tutelage of his father, Abraham, and father two sons, Jacob and Esau. Jacob will change his name to Israel and have twelve sons, one of which will be named Joseph, to whom he will give a coat of many colors.

Abraham will live on, survive the death of his wife, Sarah, remarry and father several other children none of whom rise above obscurity. And then, in the 24th chapter of Genesis we are told of his death. "This is the length of Abraham's life: one hundred seventy-five years. Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people. His sons, Isaac and Ishmael buried him in a cave of Machpelah...with his wife, Sarah."

HE LIVED BY FAITH

He lived by faith. He grew and learned and contributed to the world and became the founding father of the world's three great religions. He loved and was loved. And then, he grew old and he died.

To live by faith is to live according to God's plan and according to God's will.

That is not to say that God has our lives planned out for us ahead of time. I sincerely believe that God gives us a great deal of freedom and latitude in deciding which direction our lives will go. And because God has given us such tremendous freedom God has also shared with us his will, his desire for us which we are free to heed or ignore.

To live by faith is to live a life which heeds God's will and, to the degree that we are able, obeys God's will.

Our contemporary culture tends to equate faith with belief. To have faith, we are told, is to believe something that's really hard to believe because it is counter intuitive, or non-rational, or just plain old unbelievable. That is not the meaning of faith in the biblical sense.

Faith is about belief, yes, but it is more than belief. It is risk. And it is action.

To live by faith, Abraham teaches us, is to believe what God says to us and, then, to live our lives according to that belief – and here's the tough part – even when we don't know what the outcome is going to be.

To live by faith is to pick up your whole family and move to "God knows where" just because he tells you to. To live by faith is to accept that you're going to be a parent even though you're 100 years old. To live by faith is to divide your land, giving the best part to your nephew because it's the right thing to do.

To live by faith is to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you even though you don't know if they'll love you back.

To live by faith is to feed the hungry and clothe the naked even though they may not deserve your charity, just because Jesus told us to.

To live by faith means standing erect and refusing to bow before the king even though it means you may be thrown into the lion's den or the furnace of the blazing fire. It means going before the king unbidden and realizing that if you die, you die. It means standing before a giant warrior with only a sling and five smooth stones. It means calling an adulterer an adulterer even if it means losing your head.

It means following Jesus, even if the path leads to Calvary.

*"And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—³³who **through faith** conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight."*

This is the life which Abraham lived, the life of faith. May God grant such a life to each of us.

AMEN

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Belief is intellectual assent. Faith is action based on belief, reason and experience but still without guarantee. What are the things in which you have faith? What are the things you simply believe in?
2. Living by faith means living with assurance but no guarantees. What is the difference?
3. What keeps us from living by faith? Why do we want guarantees? Why, according to Hebrews, Chapter 1, is that a mistake?
4. All these people in the early books of the bible live really long lives. How could that be?
5. Apparently, living by faith gives Abraham the courage to actually argue and bargain with God for the lives of the Sodomites. Have you ever found yourself arguing with or bargaining with God? What role did faith play in that interaction?
6. According to what we've learned from the life of Abraham, living by faith often means doing the right thing even when we have no guarantee what the outcome will be. Can you give some examples of such living that crop up on an average day? How does this apply to such situations as:
 - A panhandler asks you for money.
 - The offering plate comes around in worship.
 - Someone cuts you off in traffic.
 - Someone jumps in front of you at the checkout.
 - Someone is rude to you or snubs you.
 - Someone forgets to recognize you for the outstanding work you've done.
 - Someone bullies your child.