

Abraham – Shaky Faith in a Faithful God

From the sermon series: No Stained Glass Saints

Text: Romans 4:17

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

...this promise, then, was valid before God, the God in whom he put his faith, the God Who makes the dead live... Romans 4:17

I inaugurate a series of messages entitled, "No Stained Glass Saints," beginning in this message with Abraham. The purpose of this series is to march before us biblical characters through whom God has effected His purposes of salvation and the establishment of His Kingdom in order that we might understand that God's Kingdom is a witness to what God can do with people who respond in faith to Him – and not what human individuals can accomplish through their piety, righteousness or goodness.

My purpose in this series is not the debunking of biblical heroes. There is enough debunking of leaders and celebrities in our society. It has become a common occurrence for everyone who has known anyone who was anybody to rush into print with all the petty and lurid details of the lives of public figures, reducing them to the level of the common, the mediocre.

It is a disappointment and a disillusionment, often, when the mighty are shown to have clay feet, when the great ones are revealed to share our common human weaknesses and flaws.

We know all persons share a common humanity. We should not be surprised at the revelation of the secrets of the hearts and lives of public persons or giants on the scene of history.

Still, we are disappointed, let down. We want heroes, heroines. We need models, persons who inspire us and elicit from us our best,

I am not setting out to rob you of biblical heroes. I am not going on an iconoclastic binge to destroy your idols. I am, however, hoping to demonstrate

that the history of God's saving moving in our history points to what God can accomplish with ordinary human beings who trust Him and heed His word rather than what great persons can accomplish on behalf of God.

The Bible teaches theology, not morality.

But we have turned the Book of Theology - the Book about God - into a book of morality, a book about human behaviour.

The Bible is about God, about God's eternal purpose, about God's grace, about God's faithfulness, about God's steadfast love. Only secondarily and derivatively is it about the human person, the human family, human response, human behaviour.

It is theology - a word about God, not morality (from *mor-*, *mos*: custom; plural *mores*: manners, morals, character): a code of human behavior, of or pertaining to character, disposition, of or pertaining to distinction between right and wrong, good and evil.

My purpose, then, is to exalt the Lord, to point to His Sovereign grace and draw our minds and hearts to Him, to trust His steadfast love and rest in His faithfulness to His saving purpose.

I begin with Abraham. Abraham was the Father of the Faithful, and I begin with him because that is where the whole covenant history began. Those eleven chapters of Genesis that tell us about the Creation and then the Fall of the human family and all of the disastrous results that issued in the judgment of the Flood and God beginning again, and then even after the new beginning, the human race rebelliously building the Tower of Babel – these symbolic stories point to the incorrigibility of the human person, which is the prelude to God's movement of Grace whereby He calls one person, Abraham, and through him, builds a nation that issues in Jesus, that issues in the Church, that will issue in the final consummation of His Kingdom. The story of the Bible is the one story of a God Who moves through human persons and human history, finally to effect His purposes. And its prelude, those first eleven chapters, tell us why His grace is necessary, because time and time again it is demonstrated in those early chapters that we cannot do it on our own.

You may remember back in Easter that I chose Genesis 11:30 as a part of my text for Resurrection morning. It is a most remarkable little statement about Abraham's wife, Sarah. It says, "Now, Sarah was barren." And perhaps you'll remember that I remarked about how remarkable it was that, when God was at the point at which He would build a family and a nation in order, finally, through that nation to win all nations, that He would start out with a couple who was barren. Now, that's not an accident. That little phrase in the 30th verse of Chapter 11 of Genesis is not an accident. "Sarah was barren."

It was a theological pronouncement of the impossibility of the human construction of the Kingdom of God. It was the insight of the Old Testament writer that if the Kingdom would be effected, it would be effected by the steady faithfulness and powerful love of God, and not through human manipulation, human ingenuity, human industriousness, human faithfulness, or anything human. Sarah was barren. And the 12th Chapter opens when God called Abraham, and said, "I will bless you and in you all nations of the earth will be blessed." And on this Worldwide Communion Sunday, we, the people of God, celebrate the one God and the one Faith, the one Baptism; we celebrate the face that we are here together on behalf of the whole world, for we are the heirs of Abraham and it is through the Church that all nations of the earth are to be blessed.

Abraham was a great man of faith, and he is a model of faith. Paul sets him forth as a model of faith. Paul says how remarkable it was that old Abraham didn't doubt and didn't waver in his faith, but rather believed God, Who can call into existence the things that are not as though they were!

Ah, but Paul, wait a minute. Let's argue with the good Apostle for a moment. Is that all there is? Is it just the story of Abraham's unwavering faith? If it is really the story of Abraham's unwavering faith, then I don't belong to Abraham's club. If the Kingdom came in those days through Abraham because Abraham didn't waver in his faith, then, sorry, Father, I don't qualify. Put me on the second team, or maybe just let me sit this one out.

Paul, are you sure he didn't waver? Well, what does the story tell us? If we had time this morning we would go on in that 12th Chapter. Do you know what happened immediately after Abraham's call? It says Abraham went. Good for you, Abraham. God said, "Go," and Abraham went. Good for you, Abraham. And then you know what happened? He got to Canaan and there was famine there. Oh, so this is the Promised Land? Famine? He says to Sarah, "We'd better pack up and go down to Egypt." And they got near Egypt, and he said, "Hey, Sarah, make like you're my sister because you're a beautiful lady and Old Pharaoh might look at you and want you and if he wants you, he'll do away with me! I'm not really so concerned about him having you, but I don't really want him to do away with me!" And if you would go to the 20th Chapter of Genesis, you would find a similar story. This time it's not Pharaoh in Egypt, but Abimelech.

Now, it's in the Bible. Abraham lied to Pharaoh in order to protect his skin. This is the guy who hears the call from God Who says, "I'll make of you a great nation and in you all nations of the earth will be blessed." But Abraham said, "Hey, Sarah, we'd better take this matter into our own hands." Nice going, Abraham. I'm feeling more akin to you all the time.

And then the years go by and the barren Sarah is barren still. And Sarah says, "You know, God is good, but maybe He needs help. Let's help Him out. Let's get a little human management and a little human ingenuity at work here. Abraham,

why don't you take Hagar as a second wife? I'm barren. Perhaps she's fruitful." And Abraham says, "Well, I'm not above that." And the issue of that is Ishmael. And then there is a marvelous encounter again between Abraham and God and the promises of the Covenant are reiterated in the 17th Chapter of Genesis, and God says, "I'll be a God to you and to your seed after you, and I will bless you and your seed will be as the stars of the heaven and the sand of the sea."

Abraham stands awestruck before God, and then he says, "Oh, by the way, Lord, would it be all right - could Ishmael stand before you? Can't we give up this ridiculous idea that old Sarah at 99 years old is going to conceive in her womb that is withered as a prune? Could Ishmael stand before you? Come on, God, I'd like to get you off the hook. I'd like to make it a little easier for you."

God says, "No way! Because, if Ishmael would stand before me and if Ishmael would be the line of the Kingdom, then you could always look back and say, 'Well, God promised this, but I had to come in and help a little bit. There had to be a bit of human manipulation, a little bit of human management, a bit of human control.'" God said, "No way! I love Ishmael. I'll bless Ishmael. But it won't be Ishmael. It will be a son of Sarah's barren womb."

Abraham said, "I guess I get the point." And eventually there was an angel messenger who came down outside the tent and told old Abraham that Sarah would have a child. Sarah was listening behind the flap of the tent - and she laughed. She tried to hold it in, but it exploded. The angel said, "Why is Sarah laughing?" Sarah said, "I wasn't laughing." The angel said, "Yes, you were laughing. But I'll tell you the joke's on you, because you're going to conceive and you're going to call your boy 'Laughing.'" (That's what Isaac means - laughing.) "You're going to have a little boy and I'll have the last laugh. Isaac will stand before me."

Ah, isn't it wonderful that the whole covenant of God was initiated with this man of such great heroic faith, noble, great Abraham - the Father of the Faithful?

Don't you believe it. Old Abraham struggled to hold on to the promises of God just as much as do you. Abraham knew just as much as you do how ridiculous it is to play by God's rules, to live by His Grace, to trust in His promises. Abraham was tempted just as much as you are to take matters into your own hands, to manipulate a little bit, to have a little human management, a little human control, and help God out.

Ah, the story of the scripture is not what God was able to do because there were a few great people around to do it for Him. The story of the scripture is about the great God Who can use flawed people like you and me to effect His purposes.

Well, I understand Paul. Abraham is a model. He is a model for me – a model of hearing the Word and heeding the Word and following the Word. He's also a model for me in recognizing that my faith wavers and doubts overcome me and

sometimes I say, "I can't believe it." And when I go my own way, getting off God's way, Abraham is also a model for me because I know that, like Abraham, and in spite of Abraham, through me and in spite of me, God will do His thing.

Shaky, shaky faith in a faithful God. That's the glory of the biblical story. And so, come to this table. Take bread and take wine and know again that God loves us, and Jesus died. He loved us and gave himself for us. I take the bread and I take the wine and I taste it and it becomes a tangible sign of the love of a God Who will never let me go, even though I let Him go all the time. A God Who will never forsake me, even though I forsake Him all the time. But our liturgy recognized long ago that after announcing that we must come to this table prepared, with hearts prepared and sin confessed, this is not intended, dearly beloved, to distress the contrite hearts of God's people as though no one may come to this table but those who are without sin, for we acknowledge that we are weak and that we have failed, and therefore, that we need the righteousness of Jesus Christ. And we come and take bread and wine and say, "Thank God for Grace - Grace greater than all of my sin, overcoming all of my weakness, all of my frailty. Thank God for a faithful God Who grips those of us of shaky faith." And one day the kingdoms of this world will become the Kingdom of our God and of His Christ. One day the people of God gathering today around the world as a sign of what God is doing with this world will see the sign fulfilled when every knee bows and every tongue confesses that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God.

Thank God. It is God upon Whom it all depends. Thank God for His Grace that will never fail us, and that when we prove faithless, He shows Himself faithful. Thanks be to God. '