



"Faith Is..."

Genesis 12:1-3; 15:6; 12:4-6; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-12

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Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Abraham and Sara belonged to an extended family with large hopes and dreams. Longing for a better life in a better place, they immigrated from what is now Iraq to a land we know as Turkey. There the clan prospered though the patriarch of the clan, Abraham's father, died shortly after they arrived.

Abraham and Sara, a young couple at the time, inherited the family business and managed it with considerable success. They were living out their days as ordinary citizens doing ordinary work. In many ways they were poster children for immigration. They'd assimilated, prospered and were reaping the rewards of life in a new land.

The only wrinkle was a rather large one. As they passed into and then out of middle age, they had no children. In their world few things mattered more than descendants. Nevertheless, they applied themselves to the lives God gave them and, perhaps, lived out their family dream through their many nephews and nieces.

Suddenly, in an instant, everything changed. God spoke. That is quite extraordinary. I don't know if you've noticed, but God is silent most of the time – even back in Sara and Abraham's day. So when God does break the silence, it's good to pay attention. God doesn't waste words. This is no idle chatter or small talk.

The word Abraham and Sara heard from God was unexpected and quite shocking. God said:

I'm going to change the course of history. Things aren't working like they're supposed to. I'm about the reverse the tide of what's gone wrong. I'm going to create a new people, a nation to do my work on earth. I'm starting with you!

If Sara and Abraham were like most people they likely said, "Who, us?" Perhaps God answered, "I've got to start somewhere. Why not you?" After all, the Bible reports that God usually works in and through ordinary people who are seldom likely candidates for big jobs.

At any rate, God's word rocked Abraham and Sara's world. Suddenly, their hopes and dreams faded behind God's hopes, God's dream for the world.

But then, there was that nagging problem. It wasn't just that they'd have to leave success and familiar surroundings behind to immigrate once again. Both Sara and Abraham were "of a certain age" and very much beyond their child-bearing years. The creation of a new people to recreate the world required a son. That was no small problem.

Nevertheless, Abraham and Sara packed up their belongings, loaded them on several camels, gathered their several herds of animals along with their nephew Lot and his family and headed for Canaan, the place where this new nation would be born.

At the end of their long journey – herds of animals move slowly – they settled in a place called Bethel, near Jerusalem. Years passed, they moved several times, ended up back in Bethel, and waited for that promised son. And, it seemed, God had gone silent again.

And, they could never forget, they were strangers in a foreign land. How do you start a nation on someone else's land? Usually, it takes a war to pull it off. But Sara and Abraham were handicapped, they didn't have any of the resources necessary to build a nation or start a war. It's not a bad position to be in. They had to rely on God.

The clock kept ticking. Ten and then twenty years went by and still no child. They were living on leased land, waiting to become a nation and God wasn't talking.

Nevertheless, the ancient text tells us, Abraham believed God, and it was counted as righteousness. Abraham and Sara's faith commended them to God. Oh, they had moments of doubt, and made a few end runs trying to make a new nation on their own. Desperate, they agreed for Abraham to sire a son by Hagar, Sara's servant girl. A son was born and Abraham assumed he was the promised child.

At last God broke the silence again. "Hagar's son is not the promised child," God told old Abraham. "Sara is the one! She will bear a son by this time next year.

Apparently, Abraham believed God. Or, as St. Paul puts it, "he not only knew Sara's time was long gone, he viewed his own body as dead. Yet he staggered not in unbelief, but believed that what God promised, God was able to perform."

So, that night, full of faith – hope and love – Abraham said, "Sara, I'm sleeping with you tonight!" Abraham acted on God's promise to him and, well, you know the rest of the story. The son was conceived. A nation was born. The history of the world was altered. All because Abraham believed God. Abraham is the father of faith, all faith, our faith.

Faith is, our New Testament Lesson says, "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." That's a rather abstract definition, not easy to wrap your mind around. In fact it's a double abstract sentence. Faith is, on the one hand, assurance and conviction. And, on the other hand, faith is about things unseen, things hoped for.

Clearer? Probably not. I suppose that's why the rest of Hebrews 11 is a series of illustrations of how faith works.

Take the story of Noah, for example, the author says. God broke a long silence to tell Noah that a great flood was coming, and he should build a boat to save his family and the animals. Now Noah had never seen a torrential rain, according to the story, and he'd never experienced a small flood, let alone a big one. His neighbors told him was crazy to build a boat for something that was impossible. Every bit of evidence and opinion said Noah misunderstood God.

Yet, every morning Noah trudged out to his backyard and kept on building his boat. He believed God and acted on that belief. Or, Hebrews is trying to tell us, faith is Noah's boat. That boat made visible what could not be seen otherwise.

In other words, faith is not a noun – something we have. Faith is a verb – something we do. Abraham and Sara moved to Canaan. Abraham made love to Sara. Noah built a boat. They acted. They did something because they believed in God and God's invisible world

of the spirit. They believed that God's world of the spirit is as real as this world and lived like it.

Sometimes acting on the invisible word of God is an audacious act of faith. This sanctuary is a case in point. For the first three years of its life, Plymouth worshipped in a room that held about 300 persons. And during those years the room was not always full. Henry Ward Beecher was making a name for himself, but that had yet to translate into large crowds.

In 1849, the building burned, and the congregation had to rebuild. Beecher and the leaders of the church proposed building the largest church sanctuary in America. Many people thought the idea was ludicrous. But the leaders believed God had something significant for Plymouth Church to do in Brooklyn and the world. Even though all the available evidence was against them – nobody had ever done it before, how would they pay for it, who would come – the core leaders of the church believed that every pew in this church would be filled – and more importantly, this church would reach beyond itself to touch the world. Every brick, each rafter, these pews – became statements of faith. God's people made the invisible world of faith visible in a church called Plymouth. And they changed the world.

As usual God filled the size of their hopes and dreams. When Charles Stanley became the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Atlanta, the church was in as bad a shape as Plymouth was in its worst days. In fact, things were so bad, a layman jumped up in a business meeting of the church, ran to the front, and punched Stanley in the face. The police were called to prevent a riot.

I heard Stanley tell the story of those days. He said the first Sunday he was there he dreamed of a day when every seat in that sanctuary, nearly as large as this one, would be filled. Then he told us that last Sunday, his wife sat in the last seat in the balcony of a packed church.

But God has a bigger dream than large, full churches. God, from the very beginning, is out to bless the world. God determined early on when things went terribly wrong on planet earth to reverse the course of history. God decided to plant his kingdom on earth in folks like us. Jesus came to establish that kingdom, a place, and a people who would embody what the world is supposed to be.

It's not easy to commit your life to that dream, and it's not easy to act on it either. Nevertheless, it is the heart of the Christian mission. God calls the church, all of us to throw ourselves into God's cause on earth – to live on the basis of God's dream for the world.

Every hymn we sing in this room is a protest against the way things are and an affirmation that God's world is the real world. Every dollar we put in the offering plate, whether it supports our work here or the Mission School of Hope in Cameroon, makes God's world visible and real. When we celebrate the peace of the church, it is far more than greeting our friends. It is an act of audacious faith that God is creating of us a community that will transform us and our world. Every time we show up here we proclaim anew that God's kingdom is on the move, God's will is being done.

For better and for worse, local churches like this one embody God's dream for the world. We demonstrate to the watching world that God is, and that God is at work in the world.

If you want to know if God is alive and well and working, don't read all the books about God out there. The very best ones, including the work of our best theologians, are not the real demonstration of God and God's world.

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Instead, look around! We are an act of almighty God. This community is a miracle of God. We are on a journey together with God and we are being transformed in the process. Little by little, we are becoming the embodiment of God's gracious activity on earth.

"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, confidence in things not seen."

Amen.

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