

JULY 7, 2024

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

June 30 sermon— ‘Heroes and Villains : Abraham’ Genesis 12:1-9, Hebrews 11:2-19

One figure in scripture that can be almost certainly be considered a hero is Abraham. He wasn't squeaky clean by any means, but he is included in the “Hall of Fame” of faith in Hebrews 11. That in and of itself is a feather in the cap. There are a few things we can note about Abraham that set him apart from most other people in the Bible. The first is that he was the first. He was the first of God's people. The one with whom God made the covenant. Some of what we might consider mistakes he made must be taken in context. Abraham had no Law. He had no written rules from God for guidance. In the absence of such he did the best he could. The greatest feat was simply taking God at God's word and following.

All we know is that Abraham got a calling from God at 75 years old. We've no idea the conversations that happened with family or friends. Scripture simply tells us that he agreed to follow God to the land that was promised, took his family and nephew Lot and set out to wander. They were very much nomadic at that point and along the way many adventures were had. Wandering about, following God's direction, he clung to the promise that he would have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and they would inherit the land to which he would be led. After twenty years still no child, and yet Abraham still trusts in God.

As they travel he and Lot amass great wealth and livestock. They have so much between them that the land they wander through and settle on for a time can't sustain them. Abraham looks out at the land with Lot and offers that Lot can choose where to go and settle. Lot chooses the better looking of the land and settles near Sodom. While the land was nice, the area was not. In the midst of a battle amongst kings in the area Lot is captured. Abraham puts his own army together and rescues Lot defeating the kings. When Lot has moved into the city of Sodom we have the famous story of God rendering judgement on the city and planning to destroy it. Three men come to let Abraham know what is going to happen. A wonderful example of Abraham's intimate relationship with God ensues. He bargains with God to spare the city if even one good man was in it (of course this was Lot). God agrees and in a wonderfully sneaky solution sends two of the men to Lot in the city to get him out. When he's safely away the city is destroyed.

In their wanderings twice Abraham comes across a Pharaoh/King. Afraid that they will harm him because his wife, Sarah, is so beautiful and they would desire her he tells the half truth that Sarah is his sister. He's following God but not altogether certain that this means he's under a blanket protection plan. Both times the royal household is struck with some kind of illness or issue because of the situation. Sarah is returned untouched and the kings wonder to Abraham why he would tell such a fib. He explains and then on their way they would go.

The childless situation pushes Abraham and Sarah to another act that suggests a lack of faith. They are old! Sarah is convinced she is beyond child bearing years. Her servant Hagar is offered to Abraham to conceive in her stead. On a technicality given the culture of the day, the child of the servant could be attributed to the servant's master. They were looking for a workaround. Hagar conceives and bears Ishmael which turns up unrest in the household between her and Sarah. Despite bearing him a son, when Sarah comes to him angry Abraham gives her permission to mistreat Hagar. She does to the point that Hagar flees with Ishmael. At God's beckoning she returns.

Finally at 99 years old Abraham and Sarah conceive and give birth to Isaac. Again turmoil arises between an older Ishmael and the newly arrived Isaac. Sarah complains to Abraham who knuckles under to her demands to kick Hagar and Ishmael out, which is essentially a death sentence. God rescues them and promises to make a great nation out of Ishmael despite also saying he will be a “wild donkey of a man.”

Abraham is obedient to God in following where God leads. Despite this there are also actions that are borne out of a faith that isn't necessarily rock solid in the day to day of life.

Finally we have the story of God asking Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. His only son. In a horrifying act of obedience and trust Abraham takes Isaac to the mountain and is poised to plunge a knife into him when an angel tells him "stop!" He does and a ram is provided for the sacrifice. This is a sense that even though Abraham had no idea what the future might hold after killing his only son, he's finally willing to trust that if God makes a promise God has a plan. This is what to take from this story. Dwelling on the disturbing extremity of the request takes us down another path which we'll not delve into here.

This story has to be interpreted with grains of salt. The request is extreme. There are people throughout history who have "heard the voice of God" asking them to do terrible things. Wanting to be faithful like Abraham they go ahead and do it. When I lived in Johnstown a man heard God tell him to burn down a movie theatre. He did it. Trust me, that wasn't God. In fact one vital part of the story of Abraham and Isaac is that the request was wild, and not something that seems in keeping with God revealed in Christ. The catch is that God halted it before the atrocity was committed. If we hear God asking us to do something counter to God's character we do well to remember that in this story God stopped it before it actually happened. If you don't hear God say "STOP!" when about to commit the act, it's clearly not God.

Hebrews uplifts Abraham's trusting God and willingness to be obedient to sacrifice Isaac as marks of his great and abiding faith. We also must recognize that, as Paul points out in Galatians, it is through Abraham's "seed", not "seeds", that all the world (Jew and Gentile) would be blessed. This is the promise that the Messiah would come through his lineage. The whole path to redemption began with the faithfulness of one man, Abraham.

So what can we learn from Abraham?

I suggest that one of the greatest things we can learn is that humility before God is key. Abraham never saw these descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. He had Ishmael and Isaac, then after Sarah died he remarried and had six more children. Not a bad family but not an army either. Of the eight only one was the child of promise. Those descendants that would bless the world through the Messiah came not through all of his kids, but one. Abraham is an example of trust. Trust that if God promises that promise is good even if we never see it come to pass. This was Abraham with the sacrifice. He didn't know how God would work things out but he knew God would. The trust is that God works not necessarily in the span of one lifetime or generation, but through multiple generations and even eras.

In our world of instant gratification this can be a difficult pill to swallow. We want to see results here and now. If we put in the faith and the work we feel entitled to reap the benefits. This isn't God's way. It's not about me as an individual. It's about the collective of all of us. It's about working for the betterment of all.

A second lesson is connected. Abraham didn't have the hindsight to see how faithful people that had gone before worked out their calling and ministry. He didn't have stories of God's faithfulness even in situations that seemed impossible. He was the first. His attitude to keep forging ahead even when he wasn't seeing results tells us he understood that he was the first link in a long chain that God would work through throughout the ages. We too are a link in that chain.

Our job is to discern God's call and live into it faithfully. We may not see results quickly. It may take time. We might be simply laying the foundation for the next generation to build upon. We owe it to them to do our absolute best to live and minister faithfully to God, imitating Christ, and guided by the Holy Spirit so that they have the greatest possibility to continue passing this gospel message down to the generations that will follow them.

Faith is never a solely personal endeavor. It is never a selfish endeavor. Faith is always casting forward to trusting that God has bigger things in store beyond ourselves. We live in faith and trust that what we do now will be used in the future to continue spreading the gospel beyond our own lives. It's about how we inspire others to their own faith in Christ. That inspiring isn't just belief, it's action. As we and they act Christ is spilled into the world. In the end it's never about ourselves. The goal is to live out our faith in a way that inspires the world around us to follow Him. The goal is to inspire those around us to live into that gospel in a way that propels it into the future compelling the world to a greater sense of compassion, grace, and love.