

“Where Faith Gets Its Strength”

Genesis 15:1-6

August 11, 2013

12th Sunday After Pentecost

What if I told you that I knew of someone who supposedly was strong in faith, yet lied to get out of a danger rather than having faith in God to save him? Furthermore, he nearly gave up what God had given him to keep the peace rather than trusting God to help. He twice tried to do things his way because he didn't trust God to do things His way. And once he even laughed in God's face because that which God was asking him to believe was just too unbelievable. Who is this horrible hypocrite with such a weak faith that he couldn't trust his way out of a paper sack? Why, it is that paragon of virtue and hero of faith for both Jews and Christians, Abraham. Really? Indeed!

God called Abraham out of pagan idolatry and promised to give him land, make him a great nation, and bless all nations through the Savior that would come from his family. Abraham believed in the Lord, left his family and friends, and journeyed to land that the Lord had given him. So far, so good.

But this man, sinner like you and me, did not always exhibit strong faith. When Abraham and his wife, Sarah, went to Egypt during a famine, Sarah was so beautiful that Abraham feared that Pharaoh would kill him and take Sarah as his wife. So, in order to save his own neck, Abraham lied and said that Sarah was his sister. Pharaoh took Sarah as his wife, but the Lord warned him not to do so and Abraham got her back. Abraham had nearly given away the one through whom the great nation would be born because he didn't trust the Lord to protect him.

Later, when Abraham had a conflict with his nephew, Lot, over land for their respective flocks, Abraham decided it was best for him and his herdsmen to part company with Lot and his herdsmen. Abraham told Lot to choose which land he wanted. Fortunately, Lot did not choose the land which the Lord promised Abraham. Abraham nearly gave away the Promised Land because just to keep the peace.

Abraham started to age. Not only didn't have a great nation under him yet. He did not have a son – a single heir. Abraham began to doubt whether God was going to keep his promise so twice Abraham tried “help out” God by doing things his way. The first is in our text for today. Abraham is planning on adopting his servant, Eliezer to be his son and heir with the hope that the Lord's plan could be carried out through him. The Lord said, “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.” Well, when that didn't happen, Abraham doubted even more. Since the heir was to be his own flesh and blood son and Sarah was barren, Abraham tried to circumvent God's will by creating a child with Hagar, the slave girl of Sarah.

Abraham might be the only man to laugh in God's faith out of disbelief and live to tell about it. When the Lord continued to insist on carrying out His plan of salvation in His way and Abraham wasn't getting any younger, the Bible says, “Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, ‘Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?’”

I do not tell you these things to tear Abraham down. He is neither a paragon of virtue nor a hero of faith. He is simply a sinner like you and me. But I also do not tell you these things to make you feel good about yourselves – as if you are a better person than this Biblical figure because you've never doubted God like he did. If you lie to save your skin instead of trusting the Lord, you are just as faithless as Abraham. If you give up the doctrines and teachings of God's Word just to keep the peace, you are as much of a sinner as Abraham. If you try to do things your own way because God's way doesn't seem to be working, you have as little trust as Abraham. If you laugh at God's way because His way seems to be too unbelievable – that one man's death could save all who have ever lived or ever will live; that a man can stand up and forgive sins; that water can wash away sin; or that bread and wine could convey forgiveness – then you are no different from Abraham.

Even though we talk about being saved by God's grace, we often act as if we have some part in it, even if it's just to make a decision to accept Jesus and invite Him into our hearts. Faith then

becomes an action on our part to manipulate God into doing what we want Him to do. If we get what we want, it's because our faith was strong. If we get what we don't want, it's because our faith was weak. Such a view of salvation and faith is fraught with uncertainty and insecurity. Have we truly invited Jesus in? Have we believed hard enough?

The good news is that salvation, as well as faith to receive salvation, are totally by God's grace. He does it all. We passively receive it. Abraham was saved by grace. The Lord did not save Abraham because Abraham invited Him into his heart. Abraham was a pagan and an idol worshiper. Similarly, God did not choose Abraham because Abraham believed. Abraham believed because the Word of the Lord came to Abraham and created faith in him. When that faith waivered, it did not damage or destroy Abraham's relationship with God. The Word of the Lord continued to come to Abraham to restore and reinvigorate that faith. Sometimes, the Lord used objects as He did in our text for today. When Abraham was unsure about God's promise to make a great nation of Him, God spoke again that promise by directing Abraham's attention to the stars of heaven and promising that Abraham's offspring would be just as numerous. When Abraham believed, by God's grace, through the Word of the Lord and the visible signs, the Lord declared Abraham to be righteous.

The same is true for us. God did everything to save us from sin and evil, from death, and from the power of the devil through His Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus obeyed God's Law for you perfectly and completely, earning holiness for you, because you would not and could not do it. Jesus took God's anger and judgment of your sin and His punishment for your sin on the cross, paying your debt before a holy God, because you would not and could not do it. Jesus defeated death and restored eternal life for you by rising from the dead and exiting the tomb alive again, most certainly because you could not do that.

Jesus has done it all. You and I have contributed nothing to the process. As the familiar Bible verse says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith." (Eph. 2:8) By God's undeserved love, you are saved from sin, saved from death, and saved from hell. Faith is simply the instrument which

receives this salvation and that, too, is a gift of God's grace. As that passage continues, "And this [faith] is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." (Eph. 2:9). God creates faith in us through the giving of the Holy Spirit in Holy Baptism or through the reading, teaching, or preaching of the Word of the Lord.

Faith is faith. Measuring it in degrees is not helpful. It doesn't matter what how hard or weakly you believe; how strong or feeble your faith is. What is important is the object of your faith, not how hard you believe in it. If you are drowning in the middle of the ocean, holding on for dear life, and someone in a boat tosses you an anchor, you can hold on to it as tightly as you want, but you will sink and drown. If someone tosses you a life preserver, even if you are barely holding on to it, you will be saved and live. The object of our faith is Jesus Christ and He saves you whether you are strongly holding on to Him or barely holding on to Him. He does the saving, not your strong believing.

Faith is very passive. Faith receives only what God promises. For, without a promise of God, there is no benefit. Without a promise of salvation through Jesus' death on the cross, the crucifixion becomes the unfortunate death of 1st century Jewish rabbi in Israel. Without a promise of rebirth and new life, Holy Baptism becomes just water. Without a promise of forgiveness of sins, Holy Absolution becomes just a man babbling words and Holy Communion becomes just a light snack during the service which is neither tasty nor satisfying. All of these things would be as laughable to us as the prospect of becoming a father at age 99 was to Abraham without a promise from the Word of the Lord.

Faith clings to promises of God. God promises salvation through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Faith holds on to that promise. God promises the washing away of sin, new birth, and the gift of the Holy Spirit in Holy Baptism. Faith holds on to that promise. God promises to speak through a man and forgive sin in Holy Absolution. Faith holds on to that promise. God promises to share the very body and blood of His Son, Jesus Christ, in, with, and under bread

and wine to forgive our sins, strengthen our faith, and give us eternal life. Faith holds on to that promise.

Still concerned about strength of faith? It's not an invalid question but there are invalid answers. The key to strong faith is not by trying harder to believe or being more sincere in your belief. Since faith is a gift of God created by the Word of God, then strength for your faith is also a gift of God created by the Word of God. What God gives, He also sustains. What the Word of God creates, it also strengthens.

There's no rigorous path to strong faith or any magic formula. Simply be where the Word of God is. Recall who you are because of the Word of God in the water of Holy Baptism: children of God. Be strengthened in faith by hearing the Word of God as Abraham did. Hear it through reading. Hear it through studying. Hear it read and preached. As Abraham saw God's promise in the stars, see and experience God's promise for you in the water, bread and wine. When you do that, faith is strengthened. When you don't do that, faith is weakened. It's as simple as that.

Instead of speaking of faith is something which we have to create and maintain and worrying about how we do that, let's take a different approach. Instead of saying, "My faith got me through it" during a crisis, how about saying something like this? "God got me through it and gave me faith to trust Him." Or, instead of lamenting, "My faith was so weak", how about saying: "I was weak; nevertheless God was strong and gave me faith to believe Him"? You get the idea. When God, through Christ Jesus, is the source of faith, the object of faith, and the strength of faith, there is only certainty and security. You can never go wrong. Amen.