

MY FAITH IS PERSONAL

I will never forget the feeling I had during my high school graduation ceremony. High school was a wonderful experience for me. I wasn't valedictorian, nor was I a brilliant enough student for any academic award except for my National Honor Society pin. However, I was student body president. I was friends with everyone in the school with whom I wanted to be friends, and I was seen as someone who would surely succeed in whatever he chose to do.

I was firmly in my comfort zone.

Suddenly as I listened to the commencement speaker, a wave of terrible panic came over me. What if college really is harder than high school? What if I struggle to succeed at what I want to do? What if it really would be challenging to live out my faith and stand for my beliefs?

Has anyone in here ever felt like that before?

In today's Scripture we learn about Abraham and faith. Because of his faith, Abraham went someplace he never would have dreamed of going. Because of his faith, God was able to get hold of Abraham. God changed him, and God impacted and changed the lives of all who saw Abraham's faith. Hopefully along the way we'll hear God speak to us about how we can be people of faith and how that personal faith can impact people around us.

I hope you have learned a lot in this series we're calling "It's Personal." In "It's Personal" we're trying to link three important facets of our lives with the phrase, "My Savior, My Story, My Friends". Through stories like Peter and John, Thomas, Jeremiah, Mary Magdalene, and today, Abraham, we are seeing how God is present in our doubts and struggles and every area of life and how His presence, and the subsequent changes He makes in us, are things that just can't be hidden.

If anyone was living life in his comfort zone, it was Abraham, who we first meet in the Bible as Abram. His story starts way back in Genesis, chapter 12. In the opening chapters of the Bible, we read how God created the world, how sin entered the world, and how God continued to give humanity opportunity after opportunity to prove themselves. Of course, as a whole humanity failed at every turn, nonetheless there were shining exceptions: Abel, Enoch, Noah, and now, Abram.

Abram really is an unknown until he appears on the scene here in Genesis 12:1. He is middle-aged, middle-class, and in a comfortable family situation as the firstborn son, and heir, to his father's estate. Dad did okay for himself. Abram had a trophy wife who was regarded by all as stunningly beautiful. And he drove a red convertible camel. Everything was great for Abram and his trophy wife Sarai except for one thing. They had no children.

For some people having no kids is no big deal. For other childless couples it is quite traumatic. It certainly was that way from Abram and Sarai. As Abram grew in wealth he surely thought, "Someday I will have a little girl to spoil with all these things. She will look like her Mother and will be just like her except she will adore me." And I'm sure sometimes he would think, "You know, I'm about to inherit Dad's stuff. Who's going to inherit my stuff?"

You know that was a big deal in those days. You wanted to have progeny. You can criticize this all you want but that's the way it was back then – and in many places it is still like that today. The family name needed to continue and the only way it would continue was to have sons. Leaving a huge inheritance for your heirs was your last great sign that you lived a life of significance.

Abram's brother had a little boy, Lot, and when his brother met an untimely death Lot needed to join Abram and Sarai's family. Abram and Sarai received Lot joyfully and raised him as their own.

One day, as Abram was busy about his family's business and Sarai was busy with tennis lessons or whatever rich man's trophy wives do, God appeared to Abram out of NOWHERE. He called him to get up out of his comfort zone and go somewhere completely unknown to him, and then God made an incredible promise: Abram would have descendants as thick as dust and would inherit a land that God would show him.

The Scriptures say that Abram got up and obeyed this call of God, and he left. Abram traveled some distance and when he got to a place called Shechem, God appeared to him there. Then Abram traveled to a valley between two towns named Bethel and Ai. We see here an important principle of faith: Faith is demonstrated through obedient action. Not only is it demonstrated but faith is activated through obedient action. Abram obeyed and went.

When Abram went somewhere and encountered the Lord, Abram built an altar. The altar was a place of worship from which Abram called out to God, but the altar was also

a public declaration: GOD MET ME HERE! AND I KNOW THAT IF GOD COULD MEET ME IN A PLACE LIKE THIS, HE CAN MEET YOU WHERE YOU ARE, TOO! Abram's faith was demonstrated and activated through obedient action, and obedient action led to an encounter with God and a public worship of God that stood as a witness to everyone around him.

Abram got wealthier and wealthier. He already had a lot of people who came with him from his hometown for whom he accepted the responsibility of feeding and sheltering, and they served him, tending to his many flocks of sheep and herds of cattle. Lot got wealthier too. "This must be God's plan," Abram must have thought, "Lot, my brother's son whom we have raised as our own, will be the father of our descendants who will be thick as dust."

But as Abram and Lot grew wealthier and their flocks, herds, and staffs grew, they found it more and more difficult to stay in the same area. Abram offered Lot whatever piece of land Lot wanted to settle in. Lot was tired of living a transient life in a tent, no matter how luxurious it was, and he and his wife and daughters, with all they had, went toward Sodom, which was growing as a cosmopolitan center, but also growing in reputation as a place that was becoming wicked.

No doubt this grieved Abram and Sarai. They had high hopes for Lot. Though Abram made his terms of parting with Lot as amiable and generous as possible, their relationship would never be the same after that. Abram no doubt became discouraged as he allowed his nephew to move toward the lush plain that stretched out before Sodom and he retreated further into the desert.

God appeared to Abram again and said, "Abram! I haven't forgotten my promise to you. I am going to make your descendants into a great nation! I know you gave Lot the best of the land that is nearby, but I have so much more for you!!! Look around to the North, South, East, and West! I have broader horizons for you! This little piece you're living in is just a sliver of what actually belongs to you! Look around as far as you can in EVERY DIRECTION! Get out and travel it! And settle where you want, not where you feel you have to."

Abram took God at His word. He went out and found an ideal place for him and his people and all he owned. And he set down some roots there and stayed in that place of abundance for some time.

Faith gives me the opportunity to live into my God-given destiny and to share that opportunity with others.

Abram became wealthier. His community of servants and friends grew larger. He even developed his own private army. His influence in the culture around him grew. And Sarai just got more and more beautiful every day. She should have been looking her age, but she didn't. Yet there was this ache in Abram's life... an emptiness for both him and Sarai. They watched their servants and friends have children. From afar they watched their grand-nieces grow into beautiful girls. But they themselves had no children. No babies, and especially, no baby boy to raise to become heir to all their wealth and all that God had promised to Abram.

God appeared to Abram again. In Genesis 15, God appears to Abram and says something amazing to him: I AM YOUR SHIELD AND YOUR VERY GREAT REWARD. And to these things Abram said this to God, "What can You give me, Lord? I HAVE NO HEIR!"

God said to Abram, YOU WILL HAVE SOMEONE OF YOUR OWN FLESH AND BLOOD TO INHERIT THIS. AND YOUR PROGENY WILL BE AS NUMEROUS AS THE STARS OF THE SKY. Now, I don't know about you... there are probably more dust mites in this world than there are stars, BUT stars certainly seems much more glorious than dust, huh? I'm sure that's what Abram thought, too. In Genesis 15:6 we read that Abram BELIEVED THE LORD, AND THE LORD COUNTED ABRAM RIGHTEOUS BECAUSE OF HIS FAITH.

Our text in Hebrews today begins by identifying faith. Listen to the New Living Translation,

"Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see."

Abram could have stayed in his comfort zone instead of living in the Promised Land. He could have tried to control Lot and kept him where he could see him and where he agreed with the cultural norms and customs. He could have stayed in the desert portion of the land instead of moving on to the lush land near the great trees of Mamre.

Because of Abram's faith, we see a life changed by God. Eventually God changes his name from Abram to Abraham, which means "father of many nations." And he changed Sarai's name to Sarah, which means "Princess" because she would become the mother of kings.

(Did you ever stop to think how odd it was that God was calling a 90-year-old woman Princess? I guess you're never too old to be one!)

Because of Abraham's faith, he left his comfort zone – a house, his position in the family, his trust fund – and he went to this unknown place and lived the rest of his life in a tent, not a house. But because of Abraham's faith, the children of Israel knew that when they were fighting the battles that came with winning and possessing the Promised Land, they were actually coming home! Home to where their father Abraham had already been.

Can you imagine coming up to that valley between Bethel and Ai and seeing the remains of an altar and an inscription on stone that Abraham and his men had chiseled? Something that would speak to you and your children about calling on God's Name and being strong in Him? Because of the faith of Abraham and Sarah, the children of Israel, their great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great grandchildren at least, could have the confidence that they were stepping into their destiny and that, just as Abraham and Sarah encountered God and were faithful in the land, they could be too! That's powerful! That's a life of significance that goes way beyond wealth!

Faith that determines the choices you make is a personal faith. When we say "My Faith is Personal" we don't mean it's private. We don't mean it's up to my subjective interpretation. We mean it defines who I am as a person.

Our Hebrews text continues by saying, (11:3) "By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible."

Talk about counter-cultural. And yet that is what believers have believed for thousands of years. That's how God was identified to any person or group of people who had no idea who God was, "God, the Creator of heaven and earth." We say we believe that whenever we recite one of the historic creeds of our faith. And it's so interesting to me, here, that when it talks about what faithful believers believe, this is what it brings up first.

And this train of thought continues in verse 6 with these words,

"Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him."

I hope that you noticed this over and over again in the life of Abraham and Sarah. God called him to leave everything he knew and go. He obeyed and went. God rewarded him. He told him to move somewhere else. Abraham did. God appeared to him, and Abraham listened and worshiped and obeyed and God rewarded him. God told him to move out of the desert and go as far as he could go and live in a better place. Abraham did and God rewarded him.

One pastor I was reading this week said, "Faith is acting on your belief in a God who you trust... even when trusting Him doesn't seem to make sense." ⁱ And a United Methodist District Superintendent in Louisiana had this to say about how God works in our personal lives when we activate our faith through obedient action:

"The miracle working God of Bible times is the miracle working God of today. God is immutable, and does not change. God's miracle working power never stopped flowing after 100 AD. What stopped flowing was faith. Never limit what God can do in your life."ⁱⁱ

Abraham's faith (not his obedience, but his faith) made him righteous before God. Faith was the basis of his relationship with God. Obedient action flowed out of that relationship. It often expressed itself in public declarations of worship that stood as witnesses to people around him. Obedient action moved him further into God's destiny and thus built his faith some more. So, instead of vicious, we see a VICTORIOUS CYCLE.

In faith, we choose to believe God even though we can't see Him. We choose to trust Him even though we haven't yet received His promises. And in faith, we live in the hope that God's promises provide.

An old Gospel hymn says,

"This world is not my home, I'm just a-passin' through,
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue.
The angels beckon me to heaven's open door,
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.
"O Lord, You know I have no Friend like You.
If heaven's not my home O Lord what would I do.
The angels beckon me form heaven's open door
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore."

When I was a teenager many popular Christian leaders started deriding this kind of fervor as being “so heavenly-minded you’re of no earthly good.” I think we need to realize that there are great needs in the world around us and people who urgently need to receive the love and grace of our merciful Savior and King. But earthly-minded Christians are of no earthly good, either, for they do not carry within them the power of heaven.

God rewarded Abram with growing flocks and herds and material wealth. I daresay the apostle Paul was as faithful as Abraham. God rewarded the apostle Paul with shipwreck, starvation, prison, poverty, and execution. Both heroes of the faith received God’s presence in their lives on earth, a powerful presence of the Spirit that drew many around them toward God’s message and repulsed and enraged others. But for both men, in every circumstance, **GOD WAS THEIR GREAT REWARD**, and they looked for a home in an eternal city, the Designer and Builder of which is God. Can we find better examples to follow today?

This message has been more of a telling of a story than a sermon with fabulous points and an acrostic. I was going for an acrostic by the way, I just didn’t find one that I liked.

But I hope that today it has been clear that faith believes what is not yet seen, or experienced, or received. Faith is demonstrated and activated through obedient action. Faith moves us into our destiny and as we obey and worship and witness for God, we see our faith grow stronger, and we see evidence of God’s working in our lives. And I hope you have seen that faith is something that’s personal in your life. It doesn’t mean you define faith. It means that faith – and your relationship with God – defines you.

As I shared this story of Abraham and Sarah, I realize something. It’s easier for most of us to share a story than it is a dissertation. Abraham and Sarah both had a story of faith. They had struggles in their lives. Sometimes they demonstrated a lack of faith that kind of counterpointed all the great things I talked to you about today. Their story of faith and struggle and success and hardship inspired generations after them, and because of Abraham’s faith, we still call him Father Abraham today. But a story’s not a story if it’s not told.

You have a story like Abraham’s and Sarah’s. Oh, it might not be a glorious story like theirs – or it might be. I hope you can look at it and say it’s a story of faith, in spite of problems. I hope you can look at it and say it’s a story of encountering God and demonstrating faith in obedient action and even moving outside of your comfort zone to get there. I hope it’s a story that you don’t mind sharing. Because, my friends, it’s

time to share our stories... complete with the struggles, the aches, the challenges, the defeats, and the victories and mostly... our faith and our realization that in our lives, God is our great Reward.

May God give us grace today to be a people defined by faith, faith like Abraham and Sarah. Faith that moves us into our destiny, and faith that expresses itself publicly: GOD HAS MET ME HERE – AND I KNOW HE CAN MEET YOU, TOO. May we be a people of personal faith. Amen.

ⁱ "Abraham, the Hero of Faith" Jeff Strite, October 2, 2006

ⁱⁱ "Sarah's Story" Lynn Malone, July 25