

Pastor's Message – 3/5/23
 Genesis 12:1-4
 Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

It is sometimes a marvel to behold the leaping abilities of some animals. You have probably seen white-tail deer in our neck of the woods and how they can jump. But it is said that the African impala can jump to a height of over 10 feet and cover a distance of greater than 30 feet in a single leap. Yet these magnificent creatures can be kept in an enclosure in any zoo with a 3-foot wall. The animals will not jump if they cannot see where their feet will fall.

If we assume accurate genealogies, sometime in the year 2090 B.C., Abram sat alone one night, when the Lord came to speak to him. In the midst of their conversation, the LORD made three promises to Abram: land, children and legacy. At this point, Abram had no children, but the Lord promised to make him into a great nation. Could it be that this was Abram's first contact with the LORD? Poet Killian McDonnell imagines that it might have been:

“Talk about imperious. / Without a ‘may I presume?’ /
 No previous contact, / no letter of introduction, /
 this unknown God / issues edicts. /
 This is not a conversation. /

Am I a nobody / to receive decrees/ from one whose name / I do not know?”

Abram's roots had grown deep into the Mesopotamian soil, but the LORD wanted to transplant him to Canaan. He had more years behind him than ahead of him, but the LORD's greatest plans for him were still yet to come. Abram believed God, and Abram obeyed God. He trusted God's promises to him, though they were the height of improbability. And he went where God sent, though the apprehension and sacrifice involved are nearly inconceivable to most of us.

Could it be that Abram's obedience was as quick a reflex as the text suggests? The LORD spoke to him and without fanfare or fuss Genesis simply reports, “So Abram

departed as the LORD had instructed” (v. 3). Again, McDonnell lends insight into Abram’s mind:

“In ten generations since the Flood / you have spoken to no one. /
 Now, like thunder on a clear day, / you give commands: /
 pull up my tent, / desert the graves of my ancestors, /
 leave Haran / for a country you do not name, /
 there to be a stranger.... /
 You come late, Lord, very late, /
 but my camels leave in the morning.”

The LORD lays out for Abram his plans — big plans. The old man who has precisely 0 children will, in that new, strange land, become “a great nation” (v. 2).

After 2,000 years, his descendants had numbered in the millions. His family tree was immense and his descendants were firmly established in and identified with the land where Abram himself was only and always an alien.

Paul tells us that we are Abraham’s descendants if Abraham is our father. And Abraham is our father, not just the father of those who observe the law, but the father of all who share his faith, faith in the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that had no being. So what can we say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor? Perhaps something, if it could be shown he was justified by his works. But the Scripture says otherwise. “Abraham believed God; that was reckoned to him as righteousness.”

If the only ones who can be inheritors of the promise from Abraham are those who do the works of the law, then, yes, faith is meaningless and we have no promise at all. Why? The law only and always brings wrath because we violate it. Therefore, any promise from God has to depend on faith, and ultimately on God’s grace and guarantee to all of Abraham’s descendants.

Polls show that in their theology Americans have trouble believing in a loving, forgiving God. We get caught up in believing that if we are only good enough or if we do

enough good works and the right kind of good works, only then can we be saved. Many Christians have trouble relating Christ and the Law of Moses. They see the Ten Commandments as still applicable.

Paul suggests otherwise in Romans chapter 4. He emphasizes that we are saved by a faith like Abraham's, not by doing works of law. Abraham lived 450 years before the law was given and so could not have been reckoned righteous by the Law because he did not know the Law. As Paul stressed, "If God's promise is only for those who obey the law, then faith is not necessary and the promise is pointless."

"Clearly, God's promise to give the whole earth to Abraham and his descendants was based not on his obedience to God's law, but on a right relationship with God that comes by faith. (Romans 4.13)." Abraham's faith that God credited to him as righteousness was a model for our present faith in Christ, who gives us his righteousness.

Paul offers all of us, if we will truly hear him, a powerful critique of the way even many of us live our lives with God and each other.

Do we treat our relationship with God as something we *earn* by what we do, by "being good" or at least "not being bad" on the basis of some checklist of good or bad behavior?

Do we ultimately measure our relationship with God using some "career ladder" or "success chart"?

Have we reduced a life of following Jesus to morality and status instead of actual faithfulness to trust him and follow where he leads every day?

How about our relationships with others? Do we approach others as those to whom God has also offered salvation by faith, or do we expect them to prove themselves to us by their works and/or their status before we embrace and support them as God has embraced and supported us?

Or have we gone Gnostic, and decided we're "in" because we have the "right knowledge" (intellectual assent to the right doctrines)?

All of these miss the biblical understanding of faith. And all of these are "dead-end" paths. None lead to life. It's time for rebirth.

"Faith" in Scripture never means mere assent to an idea. Faith means placing one's complete trust in the one being followed and therefore following where that one leads. That's why James could write "faith without works is dead" without at all contradicting what Paul was teaching to the Christians in Rome.

Abram was reckoned righteous not because he was good, or at least not bad, or because he was successful, or because he had the right ideas. He was reckoned righteous because he trusted God enough to keep going where God led him, even when that meant a long journey for him and his family to start over in an unknown land far away. That's faith!

Here's another way of looking at faith. There is an old story about a scientist who believed in only what he could see. Because of his skepticism he is given a research grant to go and look for the Loch Ness monster. One day, from out of the water of Loch Ness, his boat is attacked. The scientist is thrown high into the air and looking down, he sees that the monster about to gulp him down. "Oh, my God!" he exclaimed. "Help me!" Suddenly time and space freezes. The scientist is frozen in mid-air and an angel appears to the scientist. The angel asks, "Why do you call on God for help when you do not believe in God?" "Please, forgive me!" says the scientist. "Things changed because moments ago I didn't believe in the Loch Ness monster, either."

Instead of being righteous, we sometimes behave in ways that are unrighteous. In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul says, "No one is righteous—not even one." (3:10). Looking inward, he confesses, "I want to do what is right, but I can't. I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway"

(7:18*b*-19). Paul is trying to make clear that Abraham was justified and so saved, not by the things he did, but by God's Amazing Grace!

This is the way we are saved. Faith does not save us. Grace is the real cause. Faith just receives what God has done.

Righteousness—justification—hard concepts for us to grasp sometimes. Let's look at it another way. There is a story of a man in England who took his Rolls-Royce on a boat and went across to the Continent to go on a holiday.

While he was driving around Europe, something happened to the motor of his car. In those days, no texting or Messenger or WhatsApp, so he cabled the Rolls-Royce people back in England and asked, "I'm having trouble with my car; what do you suggest I do?"

Well, the Rolls-Royce people flew a mechanic over! The mechanic repaired the car and flew back to England and left the man to continue his holiday.

The poor bloke wondered: "How much is this going to cost me?" So when he got back to England, he wrote the company a letter and asked how much he owed them.

He received a letter from the office that read: "Dear Sir: There is no record anywhere in our files that anything ever went wrong with a Rolls-Royce."

That's salvation.

And another story: A single-engine plane was flying over ocean waters with three men aboard. While still several hundred miles from shore, engine trouble developed and the plane was forced to land on the water. The three men barely climbed from the plane before it sank into the depths.

Of the three men aboard, one could not swim, and quickly drowned. The second man could swim but was not physically fit and after about ten minutes he sank below the waves. The third man was an Olympic medal winner in swimming. He kept afloat for three hours but eventually was exhausted and could not save himself from drowning. The differences in their ability to swim did not make any difference. It only kept some

afloat longer than others. What they needed was not to improve their swimming, for even the talented swimmer drowned. They all needed someone to save them.

This is how it will be when we stand before God in judgment. Our own best efforts will not save us. Without someone to save us we are doomed. We differ in our good deeds. Some perform more, some are morally dead. But in the end we all need to be saved for the Bible tells us: "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." As Paul said to the jailor, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved." Faith in Christ makes us justified in the eyes of a righteous God.

Faith is not about purity, devotion and rigor. Instead, it's a willingness to *trust God* and rest in God's arms. It's a decision to *trust Jesus* and walk behind him on the path of life. Faith is a willingness to lean on a power much greater than ourselves, and to trust that whatever lies ahead, "God is in it."

As Thomas Long of the Candler School of Theology wrote, "Every paragraph of Romans is about how people are free to live, believe and hope when they are confident that God's life-giving victory is sure." But it doesn't stop with simply believing.

The Protestant reformer Martin Luther said that "good works do not make a good man, but a good man does good works." He knew that only our faith in Jesus Christ could make us good in the eyes of God, but once we're right with God then our job is to go out and do the right things. So good Christians behave in ways that are compassionate, kind, humble, patient, loving and forgiving -- they do this not because they are naturally such wonderful people, but because Jesus has already forgiven them. "Forgive each other," says Paul to the Colossians; "just as the Lord has forgiven you" (3:13).

Compassion, kindness, humility, patience, love, forgiveness -- all of these qualities begin with Jesus, and they become ours when we trust in him. Grace is the beginning, faith accepts grace and works flow from faith. Trust and have faith in God's saving and Amazing Grace and may your camels be ready in the morning.