

Practice Makes Perfect

Proper 14, year C - Hebrews 11:8-16

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, August 7, 2016

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Our reading from the book of Hebrews this morning is a synopsis of the great story of the ancient patriarch, Abraham. The story itself stretches for twelve and a half *chapters* of the Book of Genesis, from 12:1 to 25:11. Though you've heard the story many times in serialized form since you were a child, in your children's Bible, in Sunday School lessons, and from the lectern and pulpit, but I'd commend the story to you to read in a single-sitting, *as* a story. It's a story full of intrigue and plotting and scheming, to be sure, but as our epistle writer points out with almost poetic rhythm, it is *ultimately* a story of *faith*.

It's a wonderful story about a man, who because of his faith in God's word, picked up his family, and his servants, and everything he owned, and set off to a place he had never seen before, a place no one he *knew* had ever seen before, to claim the land of promise for God's people.

It's a story of a man named Abram, which means exalted ancestor, the one fondly remembered, who because of his faith in God's promises, was *re-named* Abraham, the ancestor of multitudes, the one who made a *difference*, the father of God's people.

It's the story of a man named Abraham who, because of his faith in God, had the courage to actually barter with God for the survival of Sodom, who said, "You wouldn't destroy the city if there were fifty righteous men there, would you? Or even forty-five? How 'bout forty? Twenty? *Ten?*"

It's a story of a man and his wife Sarah who, because of their faith in the seemingly impossible, were given a son when they were extremely old, a son so unforeseen, so *unlikely*, that they named him laughter.

It's a story of a man whose faith was tested and tried and tempted time and again but who trusted in the God of promise. A man named Abraham, who even when he was asked to sacrifice the very son of the promise, took wood and fire and a knife, to give up even his promised future, until God himself stayed his hand.

"By faith," says the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, writing on *this* side of the *ultimate* fulfillment of the promises, "By *faith*, Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance." By *faith* he continued. By *faith* he carried on. By *faith* he counted on the promises of God before the fulfillment of them could be even *imagined*, much less seen.

And you know what? Not a bit of it happened in a vacuum.

You see, God didn't pick Abram's name out of a hat. God didn't flip through the pages of the Haran phone book, and stop and the first named that struck him as plausible. There wasn't some lottery to determine which of the leading citizens with a Chaldean accent would be chosen to become the father of a multitude and the heir of the land of promise. No, Abraham was chosen to occupy the promised land, because when God spoke, he was already *listening*. Abraham was even able to engage in debate with God, because he was in the *habit* of talking with God. Abraham became the father of all of God's people, because he had *practice* doing what God wanted him to do. I wonder how many of us would be ready for such an offer. I wonder what

would have happened to Abraham if instead of persistent prayer, he had spent his time in the kind of worthless pursuits with which many of us fill our days.

“Abram, go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” “Ah, yeah. Just a sec. I’ve got to pin this recipe for a two-ingredient gazelle marsala, and I want to like and comment on this comment from a “friend” of a “friend” about this celebrity’s comment on that candidate’s tweet about their favorite brand of cat food. You know, I think that makes *that* person unfit to lead our village.”

“I will make you a great nation.” “Okay. Just let me blast this one more alien camel. I’m on level thirty-three and there are only twenty-seven to go before I reach super ultimate platinum reality.”

“I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse.” “Right. Can you just keep it down a bit? This is the season finale of *The Big Brother Bachelor Survivor Who’s Got Talent*. It’s my favorite, you know.”

“But, in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed... Oh... never mind.”
I suspect there would *still* be an Abram family in Haran.

Or I wonder what would have happened to Abraham, if instead of being about *God’s* business, he had been the workaholic many of us have let ourselves become.

“Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield.” “Look, I’ll be with you just as soon as I can tie up the Zerubabel account. It’s a biggie, you know. Five drachma on the shekel.”

“Your reward will be very great.” “Reward? What do I know from reward? All day long with the adding machine, all night long with the pencil, and what do I have to show for it? If I can just find a couple of more hours to finish this spreadsheet, then I’m up for a stock option at my next evaluation.”

“Look toward heaven, and count the stars, if you are *able* to count them. So shall your descendants be.” “Okay, then! *There’s* a project I can sink my teeth into. One. Two. Three...”
I don’t think he would have ever gotten back to Sarah at all.

And even if he did, I wonder what would have happened to Abraham if like many of us, instead of listening to God’s promises, he let his life be filled with worry and fear.

“Abraham, where is your wife Sarah?” “Well, she’s in her tent over there, but she hasn’t been feeling at all well. She’s up there in years, you know, and what with one thing and another, she doesn’t get out much.”

“I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.” “That’s not funny. This is no laughing matter, you know. Do you know how expensive geriatric obstetrics can be? Why, the prenatal care alone would be staggering!”

“The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised.” “Okay, now what? Another mouth to feed. Diapers to change, tuition to save for, and then there’s the cost of the reception after the circumcision. How are we going to make ends meet?”

“Abraham! Take your son and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering.” “Well, there you go. *Finally*, an idea with some merit. But you know the road to Moriah is awfully dusty, and where am I going get someone to help with all the wood, and you know, fuel for the donkey doesn’t grow on trees...”

We may live our lives as Christians, secure in the saving knowledge of God’s mercy in the gift of his son, Jesus Christ. But if we fill our days with worthless pursuits, if we fill our nights with one more contract, one more spreadsheet, if we let our lives be consumed by worry and fear, then we shouldn’t be surprised that when God *does* call us, we are likely to let it go to voicemail.

If we want to be a part God's wonderful plan, we have to realize that faith is not so much a single deliberate act of obedience, as it is a *habit* of the heart. If like Abraham, we want to be heir to the abundant promises that our heavenly Father has in store for us, then we have to make prayer our practice, we have to make the relationship that we have with him *first* in our hearts, not whatever is left over.

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for," the author of Hebrews begins this synopsis, "the conviction of things not seen." It is *that* assurance, it is *that* conviction, that makes the difference between a life lived in poverty of spirit, and the abundant life to which we are called as disciples and servants of Christ.

Which does *your* faith hope for?