

Practice Makes Perfect

Second Sunday in Lent, year B – Romans 4:13-25

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, March 1, 2015 (8:00)

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.

The Bishop is preaching at the 10:00 service, but that leaves *you* with little ol' me again this morning. And because we customarily only read one of the lessons at this service, we manage to avoid getting a double dose of the story of Abraham. It's just as well, because in the Letter to the Romans, we get Paul's wonderful *synopsis* of the story.

The *whole* story is a *lot* bigger than the portion we might have read this morning, anyway, stretching for twelve and a half *chapters* of the Book of Genesis. It's a story full of intrigue and plotting and scheming, but ultimately, as Paul points out, it is 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 renamed Abraham, the ancestor of multitudes, the one who made a *difference*, the father of God's people. It's a story of a man and his wife Sarai – no, 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 time again, but who time after time 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. “No distrust made him waiver concerning the promise of God,” says Paul writing on *this* side of the ultimate fulfillment of the promises, “but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being convinced that God was able to do as he promised.” “Therefore,” he continues, “his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness.”

It's a wonderful story. 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 at 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, Abraham was already listening. Abraham was able to engage in a covenant with God, because he was in the *habit* of talking with him. Abraham became the father of all God's people because he had *practice* doing what God wanted him to do. And as I used to say to my boys back when they were on the tennis team, practice may not make perfect, but it sure makes it more likely you're going to actually *see* the ball when it's lobbed down the center line.

I wonder how many of us would be ready for such a serve? How many of us would be ready to even *hear* the call of God to pick up and move, much less do it without compromise or complaint? I wonder what would have happened to Abraham if instead of persistent prayer, he had spent his time in the kind of trivial 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.” (book) “Ah, yeah. Just a sec. *Nights of Arabian Love*, the latest in the Harlequin collection is just getting to the juicy part.” “I will make you a great nation.” (game controller) “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.” (remote) “Right. Can you just keep it down a bit. This is the season finale of *Three’s Company* but *Eight is Enough* for *Sex in the City*. It’s my favorite show, you know.” “But, in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Oh, never mind.” I suspect their would *still* be an Abram family in Haran.

Or maybe not. I wonder what would have happened to Abraham if instead of being about God’s business, he had been the workaholic many of us let ourselves become.

“Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield.” (adding machine) “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. Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. So shall your descendants be.” “Okay, then!” (start counting) “There’s a project I can sink my teeth into. One. Two. Three...” There might not have been an Abram family because he might not have 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 Abraham 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!”

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 a constant chatter of grumbling and worry and fear, then we shouldn’t be surprised that when God calls, the ball may sail past without us even seeing it. If we want to be a *part* of God’s plan, if we expect to be useful to the Kingdom of God, we have to realize that faith is as much a habit of the heart as it is any single act of obedience. If we, like Abraham, want to be heir to the abundant promises that our heavenly Father has in store for us, then we have to make *hearing* our habit, we have to make *prayer* our practice, we have to put the relationship that we have with him *first* in our hearts, not whatever is left over.

As Paul says, that “reckoned as righteousness” was not meant for Abraham alone, but for *all* of us that put our hope and our trust and our faith in the goodness of God and in the love and faithfulness of his promise, Jesus Christ. It is that conviction, it is that *assurance* 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. Because in the end, at least the practice of *faithfulness* *does* make perfect.