

What is Faith?
Observations from Genesis 15
Genesis 15:1 – 6
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church
May 1, 2016

When I was a college student I studied for two semesters in London, living at a place called the Lexham Gardens Hotel. Do a web search for it today and it seems rather posh. It was not posh when I lived there ☺. I noticed when I returned home from evening events that the night watchman was often engaged in animated discussion with my student colleagues. One evening, I decided to sit down and listen in. As the watchman spoke, I thought that I heard echoes of things I had read by Francis Schaeffer. I asked him if he had read Schaeffer? The watchman replied, "I see Francis Schaeffer as the only hope on a bleak cultural landscape."

"You are a Christian?" I asked.

"No, I lost my faith when I was a teenager," he replied.

His words sent me thinking. What is faith? What was it that this man had lost? When a man or woman comes to faith in Christ, what is it that they have now found?

Last week we looked at Genesis 15 and explored the meaning of the covenant God established with Abram and his descendants. Today, we look at the same text, though our focus will be upon the idea of faith. We refer to Abram as the Father of Faith. What do we mean in describing him in this way? As Christians, we understand Genesis 15:6 as a key moment in the story of sacred scripture: And he [Abram] believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness. What can we learn about faith from this passage?

First, faith is particular. It is not faith *in faith*.

Faith is particular: it is not "faith in faith"

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision:

Modern folk tend to speak of and prefer a disembodied spirituality. Some will speak of having "faith, in faith." A common modern phrase is, "I just had to believe in myself." Modern people will describe themselves as being spiritual, but resist being tied to a particular spiritual reality, discipline or religion.

In contrast, the biblical message is scandalously particular: the word of the Lord came to Abram. Abram is a particular man who lived about four thousand years ago. The word Abram receives is from the Lord. God's name is used – YHWH. Indeed, this is the first time God's name is revealed in the story of Abram. God is more than simply a spiritual force. He is a person. He has a name. There is a concrete particularity in this verse. The word of the Lord came to Abram in space and time. It is a vision, to be sure, but

a particular vision given to a specific man, revealed and given by the personal God spoken of in the Bible: YHWH.

This is the first thing: the faith spoken of is particular and concrete. Secondly, faith is this worldly. It is not a place holder for ignorance.

Faith is this worldly: not a placeholder for ignorance

²But Abram said, “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?”

What I am getting at in this point is to challenge both the skeptics and the anti-intellectual Christian believer. Mark Twain famously said that “faith is believing what you know ain’t so.” Among the skeptics, there are those who affirm the “God of the gaps:” that religion fills in the gaps until science gets around to studying and explaining things. And, among the faithful there are some who “Seem to denigrate rather than celebrate intellectual life and critical inquiry.” (E.J. Dionne Jr.). There are Christians who equate believing faith with the rejection of critical thinking and intellectual understanding.

I believe that such attitudes are not honoring of God. Faith is this worldly, not other worldly. The faith God gives is at work concretely in our lives and in our world. In this verse we learn that Abram has a specific complaint. He has a particular need. He needs an heir. He needs a son. We see Abram bring this concrete, particular need to God in faith. This is not abstract metaphysics. This is life. Abram prays: “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless.” “This is my need,” says Abram, “what are you going to do about it?” The right response of people of faith is to bring our need, all of our needs, to God in believing faith.

Faith is particular and concrete. It is rooted in the person who is the God of the Bible: YHWH. Secondly, faith is this worldly. It deals with life as it really is. Thirdly, faith opens doorways of understanding and hope.

Faith opens doorways of understanding and hope

⁵And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”

There is an essential connection between faith and hope. Abram is childless. What he and his wife want desperately is a son, an heir. They want a hope for the future. Abram’s faith in God, YHWH, is a step in the direction of that hope. God promises to him a son. And, God reinforces his promise to Abram with a concrete image. “Look to the stars” God says to Abram and “count them if you can.” “So shall your offspring be” God declares. Abram and his wife’s hope will find fulfillment through their relationship with God. Their faith in YHWH gives them hope.

This is a key facet of faith. Faith enables us to see things that as yet have not come to be. Faith looks to the future. Abram and his wife want a son, an heir. God gives to them more than the promise of a single son. Abram will become the father of a great

nation. He is the first of the biblical patriarchs. From his line will come families, clans, tribes and a nation: The Jewish people. The Apostle Paul picked up on this truth in Romans 4:18: In hope he [Abram] believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, “So shall your offspring be.” That is a marvelous phrase, Abram believed against hope. What does Paul mean? It means that Abram took into consideration all the facts – which were all stacked against his desire to be the father of a son – and nonetheless trusted in God’s promise to him. Paul writes in Romans 4: 19 – 21. He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. ²⁰No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. And, as we have noted before, unlike all the other ancient nations and peoples, the Jews continue to exist. They have an ongoing identity as a people. God’s promise to Abram is still being fulfilled!

Faith is scandalously particular, rooted in the person of YHWH and his promise to Abram. Faith is this worldly: dealing with life as it is, as we find it. Faith opens doorways, expanding our sense of hope for the future. Next, faith is a verb.

Faith is a verb

⁶And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

Genesis 15:6 is one of the more important verses in the Bible. Read the Jewish rabbis and they, of course, offer commentary on this verse. But for most rabbis this verse does not loom large. However, for one rabbi, this verse proved decisive: The Apostle Paul. Romans 4 is Paul’s exploration and commentary on the significance of this verse for God’s people. Paul tells us at the conclusion of Romans 4:23 - 25 that Abram’s example is the model, the pattern, the example for all God’s people. But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone, ²⁴but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, ²⁵who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

The most important things in life cannot be proven. You can prove gravity; or that light travels faster than sound; if you are clever at such things. But you cannot prove that life is better than death; or that love is better than hate; or the greatness of the great; or the beauty of the beautiful. You cannot prove your free will. But the fact that these things cannot be proven does not lessen their significance. Faith is a verb. It is something we do. Faith is expressed when we turn to Jesus Christ. Faith is expressed the first time we turn to Christ and in the ten thousandth time. Faith is a verb, something we do. We hear God’s promise to us and we believe.

Faith is scandalously particular, rooted in the person of YHWH and his promise to Abram. Faith is this worldly: dealing with life as it is, as we find it. Faith opens doorways, expanding our sense of hope for the future. Faith is a verb. It is something we act upon. Faith grows in abiding over time.

Faith grows in abiding over time

⁷And he said to him, “I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.”

The preacher at last week’s worship for the Presbytery of the East was Matt Brown, lead pastor of the multisite church, Resurrection Brooklyn. He preached on John 15 – the same text that I had preached on here at Fairview only a few weeks ago. One-point Matt emphasized was the essentialness of *abiding* in Christ. I thought of that night watchman at the Lexham Gardens hotel. He did not *abide* in Christ. He lost his faith. He made a shipwreck of his Christian walk. He failed to abide.

It is easy to gloss over the weight and significance of verse 7, to miss what is being highlighted. Abram is *seventy-five years old* when he hears God’s call to leave Ur of Chaldeans and move to Canaan. He waits another twenty-five years before God fulfills his promise and gives him a son, Isaac. Abram lives to be about one hundred and seventy-five years old according to the biblical record. He is not perfect. He makes mistakes. He fails at times. But the key thing to note is that he abides. Abram never stops believing or trusting in God. He keeps showing up. And that, in the end, makes all the difference.

Let me offer a word of encouragement to you at this point. I know people who no longer abide. They have dropped off the roles. They no longer practice their faith. They have lost their faith. Remember, faith is a verb. We lose our faith when we stop practicing it. You may be going through an empty period at present. You may feel like you are wandering the desert on a horse with no name. The key thing is to keep showing up. Keep practicing the faith. Abide in Christ. Walk with him. Even when you do not feel like doing so.

Faith is scandalously particular, rooted in the person of YHWH and his promise to Abram. Faith is this worldly: dealing with life as it is, as we find it. Faith opens doorways, expanding our sense of hope for the future. Faith is a verb. It is something we act upon. Faith grows in abiding over time. Next, faith is not self-centered: it is multigenerational.

Faith is not self-centered; it is multigenerational

¹³Then the Lord said to Abram, “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years.

¹⁴But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.

This is a point that everyone of us needs to hear and remember. We live in an age of the autonomous individual. The individual reigns supreme. This reality is seen most starkly when an individual declares that he or she is now transgender. When Bradley Manning became Chelsea, overnight his listing in Wikipedia, his name, his gender pronouns, his identity was changed. The key thing to note is that it is as though the past did not exist. It did not matter that his parents named him Bradley, not Chelsea.

Or that he had joined the army as a man, not as a woman. Think of all of his prior relationships: to his parents, siblings, friends in high school and the army. Their relationship to Bradley ends. He is Chelsea now. And, the world must accommodate itself to this new self-declared gender reality. In becoming Chelsea, Bradley seeks to erase his connection to the past, and redefine, self-define, his relationship to all others in the future.

Consider the contrast between Bradley/Chelsea and Abram. First, note that it is not Abram defining his own identity. Genesis 15:13, Then the Lord said to Abram. Abram is not defining himself before God. God is defining the world for Abram. The Lord speaks to Abram. And, importantly, when YHWH speaks to Abram, he gives to Abram information about the future, about Abram's descendants. Until this point Abram has, understandably, been caught up in his own needfulness. He needs an heir. He needs a son. God, at this moment, redirects his attention from his need for a son, to his future descendants. Abram's life is not for himself alone. He has an obligation to the future. "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years." Faith, my friend, is multigenerational. It is not just about you and Jesus. We have duty to the past, and to the future. The story of our faith is not about us alone.

In review: Faith is scandalously particular, rooted in the person of YHWH and his promise to Abram. Faith is this worldly: dealing with life as it is, as we find it. Faith opens doorways, expanding our sense of hope for the future. Faith is a verb. It is something we act upon. Faith grows in abiding over time. Faith is multigenerational. The story is not about you or me individually. Finally, faith is a gift from God.

Faith is a gift from God

¹⁷When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. ¹⁸On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your offspring I give this land"

In the Hebrew language, to ratify a covenant, you would say that you "cut a covenant." The reason for this language is reflected in the ritual we see Abram follow. The large animals are sacrificed and then cut in two. The halves are then laid on either side of a pathway. Then, to ratify the agreement reached between the parties in the covenant, the parties would together walk between the severed halves of the sacrificed animals. The intent is for the parties to solemnly affirm the particulars of the treaty. They said, by passing between the split halves, "May this happen to me if I were to violate the terms of our covenant."

Abram gathers the animals. He slaughters them and splits them. He then guards the pathway of the covenant cutting, chasing away the opportunistic birds of prey. Night falls. Abram enters a deep trance. He sees a smoking pot, symbolizing God's presence, and a torch, symbolizing God's word, God's light. Each of these two images pass between the severed parts of the animals. What is key in this imagery is what does not happen. In the smoking pot and flaming torch God walks between the cut halves of the

covenant. But, Abram does not cut the covenant. Abram is passive. He observes but he does not ratify. It is God who initiates the covenant. It is God who is at work in this. Faith itself is a gift from God. As the passage tells us, the Lord made a covenant with Abram.

Close

Let us review: Faith is scandalously particular. In the story we just examined, it is rooted in the person of YHWH, the God of the Bible. However, we live in the age of the New Covenant. The God of the Bible has been most fully revealed to us through the person of Jesus Christ. He is the particular object of our faith. He is the one in whom we believe. Our faith in Christ is this worldly: dealing with life as it is, as we know it. Whatever our need, we bring it to Christ in faith. Our faith in Christ gives us hope for the future. He is the one who has proven himself victorious over death. The Christian faith is a verb. Ours is the walk of faith. It is something we act upon. We believe that our faith grows over time as we abide in Christ. The faith we confess is multigenerational, tracing its roots back four thousand years to Father Abraham. The story is not about you or me individually. Our faith is what God is about in and through history. Finally, we believe that faith itself is a gift from God.

Where are you my friend? Are you a man or woman of faith? Have you confessed faith in Christ as your Lord and Savior? Are you walking in the way of Christ? Turn to him today and be saved.

Say "Amen!" Somebody!

Genesis 15:1

15 After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” ² But Abram said, “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” ³ And Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.” ⁴ And behold, the word of the Lord came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.” ⁵ And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” ⁶ And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

⁷ And he said to him, “I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.” ⁸ But he said, “O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?” ⁹ He said to him, “Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” ¹⁰ And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. ¹¹ And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

¹² As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. ¹³ Then the Lord said to Abram, “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. ¹⁴ But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. ¹⁵ As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. ¹⁶ And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”

¹⁷ When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. ¹⁸ On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, ¹⁹ the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, ²⁰ the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, ²¹ the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.”