

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
February 14, 2016
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First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV
Genesis 15:1-2, 17-18

(The Lord said) "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great."
 (Genesis 15:1 N.R.S.V.)

When God Calls

There is a story about a man who fell off a cliff and as he fell he happened to grab onto the branch of a tree that was growing out of the side of the cliff. So there he was hanging in the air. The top of the cliff was way above him, and the bottom was way below him. So he began to call for help.

"Help please, I'm stuck. Somebody throw me a rope. Help, help!"

Suddenly a voice spoke out of a nearby cloud, "I'll help you my son, but you must trust me."

"Oh good," said the man, "I trust you. I do. So please help me quick."

"Alright," said the voice, "Let go of the branch."

There was dead silence for a minute, then the man started to yell again, "Is there anybody else up there?"

As we look to our scripture passages for today, I want to remind you that the stories of scripture are our stories. They are not just about something that happened to someone else a long time ago in a land far away. They are our stories.

They are our stories because they are about our ancestors in the faith and thus our sense of identity. They are also our stories because these stories about God and his people repeat over and over again.

Our Old Testament lesson is about a crisis of faith that Abraham faced. He was called Abram at the time. When God told Abram in Genesis 12 to, ". . . leave your country and your kindred . . . and go to a land that I will show you," Abram and Sari went. God also promised them that they would have many decedents.

Now Abram is in the new land and he has just won a great military victory, but in spite of that he is saddened. They have been in the new land for many years, and he and Sari are still childless.

No doubt Abram is thinking that he has built a good thing here in the new land, but he has no one to leave it to. After he is gone, all these things and lands will go to someone else. So when God comes to talk to Abram, Abram is bitter.

God says, “I am your shield, don’t be afraid, your reward will be very great.”

Abram says something like, “Yea, right. You said that before. But here I am an old man with an old wife, and still no children. My heir will be one of my slaves.”

I want you to notice what Abram is doing here. He is trying to tell God how to fix his problem. “Having children is now impossible, so I guess I’ll just have to make one of my slaves my heir.”

Have you ever done that? Have you ever told God that “Here is my problem God, and here is the only way it can be fixed?”

I tell you these are our stories. These are the things that still happen to us. One of our greatest needs is learning how to trust God. Can you agree with me? One of our greatest needs is learning to trust God.

God says to Abram, “No, a slave shall not be your heir. I will keep my promise. You and Sari will still have a son, even in your old age. And from your descendants, there will spring a great nation.”

God told him to count the stars if he was able and that is how many descendants he would have. Then in verse six, we are told that Abram believed. Now I want you to notice that God did not offer any concrete evidence to change Abram’s mind. Well, later on God does give him a weird dream, but that hardly counts as evidence.

The fact that Abram believed is in itself a gift. We have to admire Abram for not trying to hide his doubts and fears from God. He doesn’t just smile on the outside and hide his raging doubts inside. He lays it out before God, and God answers him with reassurance.

One of the ways that God gives us reassurance is by reminding us of how he has kept his promises in the past. We need those reminders for we quickly forget.

Remember how the Hebrews were when God brought them out of Egyptian slavery? The people said, “Pharaoh will never let us go” But God made Pharaoh open his hand so they could leave Egypt.

Pharaoh changed his mind and sent his army after the Hebrews. The people all cried, “We’re all going to die!” But God intervened and held back the waters of the Red Sea so that they could cross over and escape.

The people ran out of food in the wilderness. You would think that by now, they would trust God. Instead they cry out that God has abandoned them in the wilderness and they will all surely starve to death. But God provides manna and birds for them to eat.

Shortly thereafter, the people get stuck between wells. They are out of water. They cry that God has brought them out in this desert to die of thirst. But God provides water from a rock.

Does any of this sound familiar to you? Do you know people today who is like this? Oh, right, that would be you and me. How quickly we forget. God helps us out of one crisis and we are all relieved. Then another crisis comes along and we are all raging doubts and fears again.

Some of you remember the old Superman movies. In one of those movies a man is stuck at the top of a burning building. Superman flies up and carries him out of the fire. As Superman is flying the man slowly back down to the street, the man looks down and says, "It is so far down, what if you drop me?"

Superman replies with this classic line, "If I rescued you from the fire, why would you think I would drop you now?"

It is what God is always saying to us. When we face a new crisis and are again filled with doubts and fears, God says, "I rescued you from the fire, why would you think that I would drop you now."

When we face times of crisis in our lives, we need to remember the way God has been faithful in the past. We honestly bring our doubts and fears to God and we ask him to not only carry us through this time, but also to strengthen us by reminding us of the way he has always cared for his people and delivered on his promises.

Now let me pause for a minute and confess something. I get a little tired of the stories of someone who was so poor and God fixed it so that he won the lottery and now doesn't have a care in the world. I get tired of stories about how someone was sick and none of the doctors could help, then God healed that person and now they are running marathons.

Yes, God does sometimes work that way. And yes, when that happens we need to celebrate and praise God. However, most of the time God does not work that way.

God has never promised to take away all our problems and give us an easy road in life. God has promised to never abandon us, to walk with us through our troubles all the way to the other side. God has promised to love us forever and that when we die we shall live eternally with him.

Do you hear what I am saying? We always want God to take away our troubles. Sometimes God does just that. Other times God gives us new strength and helps us endure. The troubles are not meant to break us, they are meant to strengthen us.

I found a wonderful quote in Pulpit Resources magazine that speaks to this point. "The rabbis taught that, when God promised to make Abraham's descendants more numerous than the dust of the earth, he wasn't just implying that they would be numerous. Rather, like the dust on a road, God thereby promised that they would manage to outlast all those trampled upon them!" (Genesis Rabbah 41:9, as quoted by Pulpit Resources, Feb. 2016, pg. 36.)

So sometimes God delivers us quickly from our troubles. Sometimes God gives us extra strength and walks with us through the difficulty over some longer period of time. And sometimes, God sends us into difficulty.

Charla and I have this running joke about the characters on scary television shows. The joke is that the characters don't know they are on television. So here are some teenagers in a haunted house. One of them says, "Hey, let's go check out the basement." The scary music starts to play and Charla and I yell at the T.V., "No, don't go into the scary basement. You are on television. Something bad always happens to t.v. characters who go into dark basements." But of course, they go anyway.

Sometimes God brings us to a crisis of faith and what he urges us to do makes about as much sense as going into the dark basement of a haunted house. Even when God says, "I'll go with you. I have your back." That only makes it a little less scary. God seems to be out of touch with reality. So we are tempted to say, "Oh, no! I'd really rather not. You go ahead, if it is all the same to you, I'll just wait in the car."

Yet, God continues to call us to join with him in his work. God calls us to leave our comfort zones, to stretch our faith, to trust him to provide everything we need to accomplish his work.

God's purpose is not simply to make life easy for us. God's purpose is to strengthen our faith and to make us great in the kingdom.

Wil Willimon tells about a man in his church named George. George never had the benefit of much education after high school. Yet he always enjoyed reading, especially Bible study books. George had become a popular adult teacher in the congregation. But he was shocked when the pastor asked him to teach a newly forming class for young adults.

George protested, (just like all those Bible heroes before him) "I can't do that. Those kids have just gotten out of college. They are all so smart. And I'm getting old. They would laugh me right out of the room."

The pastor persisted. God gave a push. And George responded. He started teaching and soon several young adults were attending the Sunday School class that they affectionately called, "The Bible - by George." (Pulpit Resources, pg. 35)

The stories of the Bible are not just stories about things that happened long, long ago to people far, far away. They are our stories. We still come to times of crisis, when we feel overwhelmed and filled with doubts. So we still cry out to God, and God still gives reassurance. "I have rescued you from the burning fire. I will not drop you now."

So we leave our comfort zone and follow God into the dark. For the future is always unknown to us and thus dark and scary. God knows the future, and more than that, God is light. Yet, God rarely shows us more than one step at a time. So we learn to trust, to hold on to God, to take the step before us. For it is only thus that we know the abundant life God has for us.

Amen.