

The story of Abraham tells about a man born in what is now southern Iraq, who in the course of his life moved up into Turkey, and then into Palestine, which was at the time called Canaan, and later became the homeland of the Israelite people.

He left his home in obedience to God, without knowing where he was going, and without any evidence that God's promise to him would be kept. For God had promised to make him the "Father of a Great Nation," even though at the time he had no children. As the years went by, his faith ebbed and flowed.

Both Abram, as he was called, and Sarai became advanced in years and were past the child-bearing age when God came to make a covenant with Abram, that he would indeed have a multitude of descendants through Sarai; and that God would be their God, and they would be God's people. They would make their home in the Land of Canaan where Abram dwelt as an outsider.

Then came laughter. Abram thought it was funny that a man his age would become a father. I am reminded of the character of Tevye in the Fiddler on the Roof, who also had a sense of humor about God's plan. It wasn't that he didn't believe God, but that he saw the humor in it.

So God changed his name to Abraham, which may not seem like much of a difference, just the addition of an H, but it emphasized the promise. Abram means, "high father." Abraham means, "father of a multitude." Sarai's name was also changed. Sarai means, "princess." Sarah means, "princess of a multitude."

Throughout the entire journey of a story was Abraham's faith, "and Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness." So it was Abraham's faith that became the foundation of a civilization and the great religions. Though he had some failures along the way, nevertheless his faith remained.

Paul

Paul uses Abraham's faith as an illustration of the gospel message. It is, of course, a revolutionary idea, that in the end we are measured by our deeply held convictions and not by our actions. It is in our nature that sometimes we do not act out of what we deeply believe, but out of the struggle with sin we each face. It was the same for Abraham. It was the same for Paul. It is the same for us.

Paul uses the terminology of accounting, with credits and debits. He says that for those who believe in him (God) that raised Jesus Our Lord from the dead, there will be a credit in their account of righteousness, and

all the sins are debits. Faith's credit outweighs them all.

This, like many other aspects of the Christian Faith, involves a bit of a mystery, a wonderful mystery. All those who take after Abraham's faith are his descendants, and there is a multitude.

Faith

In one sense faith is a mental, intellectual kind of thing. I don't mean that it is the acceptance of propositions, but that it involves an activity of the mind.

Once, several years ago I was at a high school track meet and happened to sit down near the coach of the Cahokia Comanches, a team that had won a couple a state championships, and had been rated as one of the best high school teams in the country.

It was early in the season. I stuck up a conversation and asked him how the team looked. He said, "well, we are young, but maybe we can make another run at a state title this year." And then he said, "I have to get their heads right."

He did not speak of fitness training or technical mastery, or even talent. He had to get their heads right. I knew what he meant, he had to convince them to believe, everything else would follow.

You have heard about what Yogi Berra said about baseball, "90% of this game is half mental." Or the legendary Bobby Jones about golf, "this game is played on a 5" playing field located right in-between the ears." Remember that Paul called for a renewal of the mind.

It is good for us to "understand" the intellectual meaning of faith; what we believe with our minds. Do not underestimate the power of this insight.

But there is more to a healthy understanding of what faith means. Sooner or later, it must be understood in terms of relationship; not so much a belief in some empirical proposition, or in the possibility of a dream, but the willingness to trust a person.

BTW - they did win the state championship that year, that young track team, and six more after that. My guess is it wasn't that their coach convinced them to believe whatever it was he thought they needed to believe. My guess is they trusted *him*, that they had been told to trust him, and they did.

Against All Hope

Paul further draws out the nature of faith by emphasizing that Abraham's hope was against all hope. He believed God. The promise of a son through Sarah was not possible, more than not likely, *it was not possible*. Yet Abraham believed; not "that" the promise

would come true, he wavered about that upon occasion; but “in whom” the promise was given.

Life itself is against all odds, and so is any future vision of it. Yet we are alive and we are here, breathing, speaking, listening, and in one another’s presence, and this present living is real and can’t be seriously debated.

We are confronted with the question, “Do we trust the one who gave us this life? The future promise may seem remote, but the present life is very real, and it is as much against hope as any vision of the future is.

All Kinds of Things

There are all kinds of things that we are asked to believe: that we have been created along with the rest of the universe, and that life is good, that sin is real and we are responsible, and that we have been accepted and forgiven; that life is better than death and love is better than hate, good is better than evil, and we are asked to believe in the victory of life and love and goodness. Sometimes when we watch the news or look in the mirror we realize the sense in which this victory is against all hope.

We are asked to believe that God became human out of love and that that person was Jesus of Nazareth who lived about 2000 years ago, that he preached and taught and raised up and cast out and healed and

made whole; and at the last was executed on a cross by someone name “Pilate.” We are asked to believe that God raised him from death.

We are compelled to believe in the outlandish idea that we can have a relationship with God; a personal and intimate relationship with that in which we live and move and have our being.

Creation, Sin and Redemption, Incarnation and Atonement (which means reconciliation), Trinity, the Forgiveness of Sins, The Resurrection of the Dead, Eternal Life. It can all seem so forbidding. Some people just don’t buy it. Others waver, sometimes leaning towards faith and other times away.

Who know what “hope against hope situations you find in your life. The question is not whether we can do the intellectual gymnastics that enable us to accept all these propositions, or lifestyle changes or attitude adjustments to live up to it if we do, but in whether we trust the one who made the promise.

And when we do, faith’s account is full. And we are in the multitude of Abraham’s descendants. Take heart.

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