

# “Courageous Faith”

Romans 4:13-25 & Genesis 12:1-9

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A twelve-year-old boy accepted Jesus Christ as his personal Savior and Lord during a weekend revival meeting. The next week, his school friends questioned him about the experience. “Did you hear God talk? One asked. “No,” the boy said. “Did you have a vision?” another asked. “No,” the boy replied. “Well, how did you know it was God?” a third friend asked. The boy thought for a moment and then said, “It’s like when you catch a fish. You can’t see the fish or hear the fish; you just feel it tugging on your line. I felt God tugging on my heart.”

So often we try to figure out life by what we can see, hear, or experience with our senses. We make calculated estimates and judgments based on empirical evidence. There’s a level of truth, however, that cannot be perceived by the senses or measured. It’s at that level that faith abounds. It is our faith that compels us to believe, even when we cannot explain to others why or how.

Shortly after I began ministering with a group of youth at a previous church the father of Jill, one of the youth, came to speak to me. He informed me that none of his children were baptized. He wanted to make sure that his children really had faith in God and was certain that they trusted in Jesus as Lord and Savior before they were baptized. Jill was very active in church and a year later completed confirmation. Jill scheduled a meeting with her father and me to request her baptism. She was very intelligent and had all the right theological answers and reasons why she should be baptized. Her father listened and then stated that she was not yet ready for baptism. It was a joy that summer to have Jill attend workcamp. One of the great joys of being a pastor is perceiving someone experiencing God. Jill had several powerful experiences with God that week. I could see it her eyes and hear it in her questions and prayers. After the trip again Jill scheduled a meeting with her father and me to request her baptism. This time Jill struggled to find words for her faith in God. She became frustrated as she tried to explain some of her experiences of God. Finally in tears she said, “I don’t know how to explain it but I know God loves me and I want to declare my love for God.” The father smiled and said, “When can we baptize Jill”.

Our scripture this morning begins with, “Now the Lord said to Abram.” I wish scripture would elaborate on how the Lord spoke to Abram. Was Abram walking around one day and God spoke through a booming voice from the sky? Perhaps Abram had a dream or maybe he heard the still small voice of God in his mind. Maybe it was during Abram’s conversations with Sari and their prayer time together that they sensed God’s call. Maybe God spoke through a sunset or the animals that Abram cared for. Perhaps Abram just somehow sensed God’s call. Or you fill in the blank with any of the ways you perceive God. Did the call of Abram come to him suddenly in one day or was it a gradual tugging on his heart over the 75 years of his life?

I wonder if the specifics of how God spoke to Abram are intentionally left out, so we can fill in the ambiguity with our own experiences of God. I could talk to you for hours about Jill’s story explaining her faith journey, but I still would not be able to explain to you how she knew that God loved her.

I am certain that God is speaking to all of us and God is constantly calling us. The first thing we learn from the story of Abram is to always be listening, sensing, and perceiving God’s activity in our life and will for our life.

Abram and Sari were certainly people of great faith. How else can you explain their actions? It is unusual for an elderly childless couple to leave their relatives, their home, their country, and travel to a foreign land. Remember this is long before the car and cell phones were talking a hot, dusty, dangerous journey into the unknown. Even more unusual was their faith in God’s promise that they would have children. They have been trying to have children for sixty years. God promises they will have so many children and grandchildren and great grandchildren that they will become a mighty nation. It is estimated today that over 3 billion of us can trace our family tree back to Abram and Sari.

How did Abram and Sari get this great faith? We have a clue by scripture’s telling of Abram building an altar not once but twice in just nine verses. An altar was a place to worship God, a symbol of experiences of God, and a lasting reminder of God’s protection and promises. Faith is not a resource that is consumed and exhausted; rather, it is like a muscle the more it is used the stronger it becomes. This morning we are exercising

our faith in worship with a visible symbol of God's love as we celebrate communion. What else do you do to remember your experiences of God? Do you share God experiences with family and friends, reliving the experience every time you tell it? Do you keep a journal or have a special symbol or place? Do you listen or sing a hymn or song that rekindles your memories or perhaps a photo album or a piece of art. Abram was a wise man. He knew his faith would be tested, so he built alters to exercise his faith through worship, to remind him of God's past blessings. I suspect that Abram did this his entire life.

Our culture today is baffled by faith. We, in turn, are encouraged to analyze the situation, weigh the pros and cons, get good advice, and make wise decisions. If Abram did this, he never would have followed God's call. The apostle Paul explains the strength of Abram's faith. He had the courage to act, because he was convinced that God was able to do what God promised even though Sari was barren and Abram was so old he was as good as dead.

Our faith needs to be strong enough to give us courage to act. One of my favorite movie scenes is of Indiana Jones standing at the edge of a cliff with no bottom in sight. The other side of the cliff is too far to jump. Indiana needed to get across to save his father. He reads from his notes, which indicate it takes a leap of faith to reach the other side. He looks across and says impossible. No one can leap that far. He swallows hard and decides to have faith and steps into the thin air. He falls a few feet and lands on something. The camera pans a few degrees to the side and reveals a bridge that was invisible from Indy's angle because it is painted like the surroundings. Faith sustains us through the unknown. Usually, it is only after an experience that we are able to see the situation from a new angle and realize that the support we needed was there all along. God is always with us. The dilemma is in our perception for sometimes we do not perceive God.

I am not advocating jumping off cliffs or testing God. My sister-in-law told how she was alarmed when she went to visit the Pope in Denver several years ago. She was traveling with a nun and they were falling behind schedule. They faced a "Do Not Walk" sign at a four lane high-speed intersection. The nun grabbed her hand and pulled her into the street saying, "Come along children. God will protect us for we are going to see the Pope." They crossed safely as cars, trucks, and buses all across the four lanes screeched and slide to a halt. This nun had great faith; however, I personally do not believe it is wise to test God by placing yourself in unnecessary dangerous situations.

Too often we get impatient with God's timing. Abram and Sari got impatient and took matters into their own hands. They completed the journey, but they still had no children so they decided to have Abram sleep with their maidservant Hager. She had Ishmael. This caused great strife in the family. This is the root cause of the discord between Jews, Christians, and Muslims today. If they would have been patient and waited another 24 years, for that is when God gave them their promised son. Abram was 99 and Sari was 90. If they would have been patient, the world would be more peaceful and united today.

Faith creates space for God to work in our lives and gives us courage to act. Wherever there is faith, there is life and wherever there is life, we perceive gifts from God. Faith gives us courage to act but seldom certainty. I suspect that at times Abram doubted his understanding of God's call and was full of questions. Where exactly is God taking us? God heard the question all parents hear, "Are we there yet?" Is it really wise to become a first time parent at ninety? When the journey was tough and things did not go their way they likely had plenty of doubts, questions, frustration and anger, but that is when their worship, remembering, celebrating God's past blessings, and faithfulness pulled them through. They did not have most of the answers and seldom knew the exact next step. They made plenty of mistakes. We can see that clearly in the story of Hagar. Yet their faith gave them courage to act.

In what ways is God asking you to have faith and courage to act? Is God calling you to greater service? Do not let the comfort and security of your present situation diminish your extravagant love. Is God calling you to be a more faithful steward? Is God calling you to make friends with an outcast classmate risking your own popularity? Is God calling you to speak up at work for ethics risking your career? Is God calling you to make time to pray everyday as a family? Is God calling you to invite someone to VBS or worship? Is God calling you to let go, forgive, and nurture a relationship? How are you listening for God's call? How do you imagine the array of possibilities that God hopes you will explore, choosing the ones that bring you joy? What is God's call for you today? For this year?

In what ways is God calling this church to step out in faith, to try something again, to do something different, and to try something new? Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's faith and courage to act. God is able to do abundantly more than we can ever imagine if we will but step out in faith. Amen

