

2 Pentecost, 11 June 2023, Gen 12:1-9, Psalm 5:7-15, Rom 4:13-25, Matthew 9:9-13. 18-26
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Faith in the Middle of the Story

May Wisdom graciously meet us in our paths and rise to greet our every thought. Amen.

This morning, the lectionary offers us a crowd of characters to teach us a lesson about faith. Abraham, Matthew the tax collector, the Pharisees, the leader of the synagogue and his daughter who died, the hemorrhaging woman, the crowd of mourners, and of course, Jesus. Surely there's a sermon in there somewhere. The question is, which one? Let's begin at the beginning, with Genesis.

The Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation" (Gen 1:1-2a) "Leave all that is familiar, all that you know, all that defines who you think you are," says the Lord, "and go to a place that I will eventually reveal to you. No, I won't give you an address to plug into Google maps so a comforting blue dot can trace your progress; just trust me and go." Astonishingly, Abram went. He packed up his tent, his wife, Sarai, his servants, and his livestock, and set out for parts unknown, eventually becoming Abraham, the father of nations. But it was far from a straight shot from Abram's father's house to the promised land or from childlessness to patriarchy. God was faithful, but God wasn't in a hurry.

St. Paul says in his letter to the Romans that Abraham never wavered or weakened in faith. But the book of Genesis suggests otherwise—that Abraham and Sarah wondered and doubted and maybe at times even despaired of God's promise. After all, why else does Abraham ask God for signs along the way? Why does Sarah give her servant, Hagar, to be Abraham's concubine, if not because she and Abraham doubt that God will "make a great nation" of Abraham through Sarah? And why does Abraham at the age of ninety fall down laughing when God again promises that Sarah will indeed bear a child? It isn't from joy; it's from *disbelief*. Eventually, yes, twenty-five years after God tells Abram to go from his country, Isaac is born to Abraham and Sarah, but in the meantime, I imagine there was some amount of eye-rolling at the dinner table whenever the subject came up.

Which doesn't mean that Abraham's faith wasn't, in Paul's words, reckoned to him as righteousness. It means that it's hard to be in the middle of a story.

Just ask the tax collector, Matthew. In today's gospel, Jesus sees Matthew in his toll booth and tells him, "Follow me." (Mat 9:9) Which is another way of saying, "Go, leave what you know and go to a place that I will show you." That journey will transform Matthew and bring him into God's presence, but it's not a pleasure trip. Along the way, he experiences the fear, shame, and grief of his master's

arrest and crucifixion, and tradition holds that Matthew himself was martyred, executed by a sword in Ethiopia. When Matthew accepts the invitation to follow Jesus, he doesn't know what comes next or how the story will end. No doubt, his faith was also reckoned to him as righteousness.

And what about the leader of the synagogue whose daughter has just died? We're left to imagine the points in the story that lead to the happy ending that we witness—all the desperate prayers that go unanswered, the agony of watching his child take her last breath, his struggle with the niggling voice of God in his ear, urging him to go, to leave behind the certainty of the world he knows, to risk humiliation, rejection, and crushing disappointment by kneeling before Jesus as he reclines at table with sinners and tax collectors, to beg him to do the impossible, to raise his daughter from the dead. And then, after Jesus leaves the table to follow him home, as the man's hopes begin to rise, this grieving father must stand still and wait, while Jesus turns to the hemorrhaging woman who has touched the fringe of his cloak. Agony. With every minute that passes, his daughter's body grows colder, the mourners close in to claim the finality of death. Surely, his faith, too, was reckoned to him as righteousness. But it's hard to be in the middle of a story.

And what of the hemorrhaging woman? There are twelve missing years of her story, twelve years of being unclean because of her flow of blood, twelve years that may have deprived her of the joy of a husband and children, twelve years of pursuing worthless cures, twelve years of unanswered prayers. We know that she reaches out in faith to touch Jesus's cloak, but when she first heard that voice urging her to go and find the rabbi Jesus, how did she know it was an invitation to set out in faith and not just the voice of desperation? What did she have to lose, after all? What was one more rejection after so many? What self-doubt did she overcome before setting out that day to fight her way through the crowd to be healed? In the end, her faith was reckoned to her as righteousness, but in the meantime, well, the meantime can be pretty mean.

So, what about those other characters I mentioned, the Pharisees and the crowd of mourners in the synagogue leader's house? Do they have anything to teach us about faith? The Pharisees have questioned Jesus's judgment in choosing to share table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus responds by saying, "Go and learn what this means. 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'" (Mat 9:13a) Again, "Go! Leave the complacency of your self-righteous judgments and set out for a new place of understanding." We don't know whether the Pharisees accept this invitation, but we get the feeling that their salvation depends upon taking that journey eventually.

And as for the crowd of mourners who laugh when Jesus tells them that the girl is not dead, they are in a place of disbelief. But then so was Abraham when he fell down laughing at God's suggestion that his ancient wife would yet conceive. The mourners and the Pharisees, too, are in the middle of a story. Someday, their faith may be reckoned to them as righteousness.

I worry about preaching the stories of faith in scripture as stories with happy endings that prove a person's righteousness. The danger is that we come to view happy endings as the proof of faith, and thus, of righteousness. And what message does that send to the people of Ukraine whose families lie dead in the rubble or to the parent whose child is not brought back from the grave by Jesus? Faith must mean something other than the way to obtain the outcome we desire. Faith must mean holding fast to God, even when we are in the midst of suffering and death, even when there's no happy ending in sight. Surely that is one of the lessons that Jesus taught us from the cross.

So, where are we at this moment? Are we basking in a moment of clarity because God has brought new life into a place of darkness and death? Are we in a place of scorn and disbelief? Have we heard an invitation to go, to leave the complacency of our self-righteous judgments, but hesitate to take the first step? Are we so burdened by suffering and loss that we haven't courage to hope that God will meet us if we move toward God in faith? Have we begun a journey of faith but now find ourselves longing for a sign that we're on the right path? Wherever we are now, we are unlikely to remain there forever.

The truth is, we are always in the middle of the story. Happy endings give way to suffering, dead ends open onto new possibilities. We can freeze the frame of our stories at different points and draw different conclusions, but we are also in the middle of a bigger story, God's story, the story of salvation. God is redeeming the world and invites us, all of us, to participate in that holy story by learning to incarnate God's generative love and grace as Jesus did.

Like Abraham and Matthew and the Pharisees, we are always being called to someplace new where God will become more real for us. And like the synagogue leader and the hemorrhaging woman, we are called to dare to hope despite the odds that God will open a way for us, not because we know what happens next, but because we don't. We can only reach out to God at every beginning, and every ending, and every minute in between, trusting that our life will be more abundant with God than without God, and that our faith, however imperfect, will be reckoned to us as righteousness. Amen.