

"SEQUENCE MATTERS"

By Rev. Victor Kim

Genesis 12:1-4; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

(03-08-20) Lent 2

Before we get into our text from Genesis 12 this morning, we need a bit of background. Abram, who will later be called Abraham, is descended from Noah, through Noah's son Shem. Abram's father was Terah and he lived in a land called Ur of the Chaldeans, which was in what is present day Iraq, near the Euphrates River. The city of Ur was named after the Sumerian moon god and its inhabitants most likely practiced moon worship. Abram's father Terah took his family, including his son Abram, out from Ur and settled in Haran, which is in present day Turkey.

Abram lived in Haran until he reached 75 years of age. By then he was married to a woman named Sarai, known later as Sarah, who was ten years younger than him. All we know of Sarai by this point in the story is that she is barren. Then, at the age of 75, the Lord appeared to Abram saying,

"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

And Abram went, as the Lord had told him...

It's hard to know what Abraham may have known about the Lord God at this time in history. We have no record of any prior interaction between God and Abraham and it's speculative to try to understand whether this God was familiar to Abraham or not, but in any event, God spoke to Abraham, essentially telling him to leave all that he knew, including that most important of connections in the ancient world, the connection to the father's family, and to follow God's command to go elsewhere. The place isn't specified, only that God will show Abraham the land. There is also a promise of blessing and to make of Abraham a great nation, implying that Abraham will have heirs, children, though his wife Sarah is barren. **So given these facts**, that Abraham was probably not all that familiar with the Lord God, if at all, that he didn't know where God wanted him to go and that he was probably wondering how God was going to fulfill the promise that he would be the father of many nations since his wife was barren, given this dubious set of factors, **of course, Abraham does exactly what God commands.** He leaves his father's house in Haran and sets off for parts unknown.

What Abraham cannot know is that it will be 25 years before his wife Sarah will give birth to a child, Isaac, and that he will never really settle down in one area for any length of time. For years after leaving Haran, Abraham will live as a nomad, going from place to place, from tent to tent, into situations of grave danger and risk, all without any sign of the promise that God had made to him. There must have been many moments on his journey when Abraham would have wanted to shout out, God, are we there yet? **It's pretty remarkable when you think about it. For so many years, Abraham obeyed God and the only thing he had to lean**

on was the promise that wherever he went, God went as well, that God would be with him.

As we know today, Abraham, and Sarah, were faithful to God and indeed God created a great nation through them. Today all three of the world's major monotheistic faiths, Judaism, Islam and Christianity, trace our ancestry back to Abraham. God did indeed bless Abraham and through him and his family, all the families of the earth have been blessed.

Abraham believed God, **and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.** That's what it says in the 15th chapter of Genesis and the Apostle Paul in our reading from Romans quotes that sentence from scripture when he talks about Abraham. **But Paul wants us to think about what that means, that Abraham believed God, that he had faith and that it was reckoned to him as righteousness.**

What do you think it means? A straightforward understanding might be that because Abraham believed God, because he did what the Lord had commanded him, that he was called righteous.

But Paul seems to think that it's not as straightforward as that. For if Abraham was justified by works, by believing, he has something to boast about, but not before God. Why not? Well, Paul argues that if you work, then what you get, your wages, aren't reckoned to be a gift, but as something that's due to you, something that you've earned. Imagine working at your job and then every pay day your boss would hand you your paycheck and say something like, hey, here's my gift to you. You'd be thinking that your boss is nuts.

It's not his gift to you, you've earned your pay, you've worked for it. **And that's Paul's point. If you've worked for your justification, then God can only give you what you've earned, what you've merited. There's nothing righteous about just getting what you deserve.** But Abraham, according to Paul, doesn't deserve righteousness, at least not because of what he has earned. **Abraham's righteousness is reckoned to him, credited to him in other words, because he trusted God, because he believed God.**

Now we might read Paul's words today and our eyes might begin to glaze over. It's almost like Paul wants to make it difficult for us. Why does he need to be so cryptic? But Paul has a point, and it's a critical one. **Sequence matters.** It seems to be a fine point, that Abraham trusted God, but that trust isn't seen as something that deserves righteousness, rather that righteousness is granted to him as a gift, as a gift of grace, **not earned because he trusted God, but given, credited to him, reckoned to him because he believed.**

Again, this seems like splitting hairs, like debating how many angels can dance on the point of needle, but there is a point to this. Sequence matters. It would be easy to understand the good things that happened to Abraham as wages earned. **But Paul says that Abraham did not follow God's instruction to cause God to love him, but to respond to God's love for him.** God's love is a free gift, and Abraham's faith is a free response to that gift. Who loved and honoured whom first, and who responded and how and when, matter, because God does not invite us to play manipulative games in the interest of garnering favour.¹

¹ Sarah Birmingham Drummond, Connections Year A, Volume 2, Second Sunday in Lent

If we understand that Abraham's righteousness was a gift, a gift of God's prior and pre-existing grace, **then we also know that this gift of righteousness remains a gift available to all Abraham's descendants, including you and me.**

Sequence matters.

How many of us would have the courage and the conviction to do what Abraham did? A number of years ago my family were taking a trip and we were driving through Glacier National Park. My wife and I were in the front; our kids holed up in the back row of the van and in the middle row sat my parents. And it occurred to me as we were driving on that part of the highway called the 'Going to the Sun' road, that I had been on this exact same road, except the last time I was, I was a teenager and it was my dad that was driving. It's true, that at some point in your life you become your parent. And if you're not careful, you'll find yourself doing the same things your parents did.

It made me think of my parents, who in their mid-30's left everything they knew, their home, their friends, their country, their language, their customs, without a job, without any money, without a clue, and headed to Canada, on the promise of something new, something better, that if not for them, then at least so that their children would have a better life. I thought, could I do the same thing that my parents did? Two children in tow, would I leave my home, my country, everything I know, to go somewhere else, somewhere I knew nothing about, with no job prospects, with no language skills, with nothing but a promise? I felt pretty sure that I couldn't do it. Now if I don't think that I could do what my parents did, how

on earth could I do aspire to the level of courage and faithfulness of someone like Abraham or Sarah?

A righteousness dependent on my merit, my works, doesn't exist. It didn't exist for Abraham either, though he was a far better man than I could ever hope to be. Doesn't matter, we're both in the same boat. The righteousness that God credits to us, reckons to us, isn't earned, isn't deserved, isn't merited, it's given as a gift, a gift of God's grace. Grace is guaranteed. Grace is not earned like wages and cannot be lost like squandered wages. Abraham did not receive God's grace for being a good man, or even for trusting God. He received God's grace because God is God. God's economy does not resemble a market economy where earnings and expenditures come as a result of effort. Grace, God's currency, is distributed with abundance and it doesn't follow predictable human rules, which means that in many ways it's a mystery to us.²

When we understand this sequence, that it is God's grace that precedes our trust, our belief, our response, it has much to say about how we ought to live.

"When they see us, do they see Jesus?" That's our theme for this Lent.

People often give up something for Lent, or more recently and more fashionably, people have begun adding things for Lent, adding a spiritual discipline, adding acts of kindness, adding intentionality to the way we live. **But whether we give up something for Lent or add something, if in our giving up or adding, we think that we are somehow making a transaction with God, that our doing or not doing**

² ibid

will garner the favour of God, then we're misguided. A transactional faith looks very different from a faith that arises from trust.

Think about two children, one who feels that he has to earn the love of his parents and the other who knows that her parents love her no matter what. The first child's actions are all predicated on getting his parents to love him while the second child's actions are motivated by her desire to honour her parents **who already love her**. There's huge difference between the two and it's reflected in the quality of their interaction with the world around them.

We know people who act out of uncertainty and fear, whether it's in their relationships, in their jobs, even in their faith lives. There's not a lot of room for movement, for adaptability. **There's a rigidity to their actions because they fear that if they mess up there will be a price to pay.** We also know people whose lives evidence an abundance of resiliency, empathy, adaptability, flexibility, who exude grace in their relationships, in their work, in their faith, **because they know that even if they mess up, they are still loved, loved by others and loved by God.**

If people will see something of Jesus in us, **it will be because we know that sequence matters.** We know that God's love precedes our trust, our belief. We don't trust God, we don't believe God, we don't follow the ways of God **to make God love us**, we do it because we know **God already does**. I pray that we will reflect carefully about this truth. Please know that like Abraham, like Sarah, like all the giants in the faith and all the faithful we've never heard of, we are loved by God **before we've done a single thing**. We are loved by God because that's who God is.

So if we really believe that, and really what's not to believe if you believe that God so loved the world that he sent his only Son to us, that while we were still sinners, Jesus died for us, if we really believe, then how we live, our faithful response, **has to proceed from a place of confidence and joy.** This Lent, and really why limited only to Lent, going forward, **can we let go of the fear based responses, of the narrowness of legalism, of the rigidity and inflexibility of those who are scared of screwing up?** And can we interact with the world around us, with people around us, with those we know and love and those we don't much like, those who are strangers, with the generosity, compassion, mercy and kindness, of a people who know that they are loved?

You know those people and those situations in your life where your grace is needed so much more than your narrowness. **We know people who, if we treated them as they deserve to be treated, will see nothing of Jesus in us.** We know those situations where everyone's expectations of us are in line with what our world demands. **If all we do is conform to those expectations, why would they see anything of Jesus in us?** Can we remember to act from a place of grace, as people who know that God's love for us is secure and cannot be lost.

Sequence matters. God loves us already, always. **You can't change that even if you wanted to.** May we live this way this Lent, and always, so that when they see us, they will see Jesus.

Thanks be to God, Amen.

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