

2 LENT MARCH 20, 2011 CYCLE "A"

TITLE: HAVE FAITH IN GOD'S PROMISES

READINGS: Genesis 12:1-4a, Ps. 121, Rom. 4:1-5,13-17, John 3:1-17

Today it's all about faith. All three of our readings focus on faith. In Genesis we see Abraham our father in faith. In Romans Paul uses Abraham to show us that it was because he believed in God that his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness. It is here in Romans that we find the fundamental doctrine Luther expressed in this way: **sinner are justified by faith**. Then in our Gospel reading today we see the verse Luther called "little babe." "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." John 3:16. Probably the most quoted verse in the Bible and it is the first time John uses the expression "eternal life" in his Gospel.

Abraham is called the father of all the faithful because of his faith. More than 1,700 years before Jesus, God came to Abram and gave him a command and a promise: "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 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." Gen.12:1-3.

This was a very difficult request, for Abraham was a wealthy landowner living in Ur, in Mesopotamia, in the northern part of what is now Iraq. He had family, friends, and an honored place in the community. God asked Abraham to leave his home and move to a new land. This was no small demand God was laying on him. It's not an easy thing to leave your home. You can ask Maureen Rabideau. She just moved and it was only across town. It must have been very difficult for Abraham and Sarah. But God spoke and Abraham obeyed. One of the most important statements in all literature is this one: "So Abram went, as the Lord had told him..." Gen.12:4. It is impossible to overstate the significance of Abrams step of faith for the subsequent history of the world!

This is what faith, true faith, entails. God speaks, we obey. Jesus made it very clear. We don't say "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." Matt.8:21 or "Let me first say farewell to those at my home." Lk.9:61. Faith is much, much more than belief. Jesus said even the demons believe. Faith is action. Faith is obedience to

God. Faith is like a 3-legged stool. The first leg is knowledge, and that means Biblical knowledge received from God's sacred Word. The second leg of faith is ascent; it is our commitment to belong to God having been saved by Jesus. And the third leg of faith is trust. We totally rely on our faith and have complete trust in it. If any one of these three legs, knowledge, ascent and trust is missing or weak then our faith can fail.

For Martin Luther faith was the cornerstone, the fundamental building block of salvation. As he studied Paul, Luther set down the central doctrine of theology: **we are saved by God's gift of grace through faith and not by the works of the law.** Here is the way Paul puts it in our second reading today: "For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendents through the law but through the righteousness of faith...For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants." Rom.4:13,16. "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand." Rom.4:22,5:1.

And in our Gospel, Jesus teaches Nicodemus that faith in him offers eternal life. Jesus emphasizes the necessity of being born anew of the Spirit. He declares that faith in the crucified Christ will bring eternal life. "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Jn.3:17. It is through our faith that we become the recipients of the most wonderful gift of God and that is his own Son on the cross in atonement for a sinful world. We simply stand in awe at a love so great that goes to this limit: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." Jn.3:16.

When I worked as a Hospice Chaplain, I was called to a home in Glenoma, which is up by Morton. A man and his wife lived in a double-wide mobile home and he was suffering from terminal pancreatic cancer. When I arrived at their home the man's wife met me on the porch and told me that she had terrible fears about her husband. She said that she was a committed Christian and believed very strongly in the necessity of Baptism, but she feared for the salvation of her husband because he had never been baptized. She asked me if I could do anything for him. I told her that I also believed in the necessity of baptism, but knew there could be exceptions, and would talk with her husband.

After I had made a few visits to Jim and we got to know each other better, we talked about his faith. I found that he was a man of very deep faith, that he believed in Christ and had accepted Jesus as his savior. He assured me that he was very much a Christian and had given himself over to Jesus long ago. We prayed together many times and shared Scripture together. When we talked about baptism Jim told me that he didn't feel that he needed to go through the ceremony of baptism and asked me to help his wife understand. I did just that for him and helped his wife accept Jim's wishes.

It was 4:00 a.m. when the hospice team was called to the home because Jim was actively dying. We were all gathered around his bed along with members of his family. There was a single lamp lit in the room and the head of Jim's bed was raised some to help him breathe easier. He had been unresponsive for the last two days. Suddenly Jim opened his eyes. His niece, Mary, was standing at the foot of his bed. He looked at her and very clearly he said, "Mary, would you please move to one side, Jesus is coming to me in that light behind you and you are in the way." His niece stepped to one side, Jim's eyes lifted up and then he settled back, closed his eyes and very peacefully died. None of us saw the light, but we all felt the presence of the Lord. I then was able to assure Jim's wife that he was saved by God's grace through his faith. **Amen.**

Pastor Barney