

Pastor Bill Sass – Sermon for Sunday, February 28, 2021

Second Sunday in Lent

NEVER TOO OLD FOR ADVENTURE

Romans 4: 13-25

Abraham was seventy-five years old when God called him to leave his home, and strike out for a land that God would show him. Abraham surely had mixed feelings. No one likes to pack up all their earthly possessions and move to a strange place, especially if you've been contented where you are.

Abraham obeyed God, though. He moved from where he had lived his entire life, and embarked on a new adventure in faith. Abraham was unsure of what would happen to him or where exactly he would go, but he went, placing his trust in God. Abraham didn't try to talk God into choosing someone younger—someone with more energy. God called Abraham and he responded. Abraham and his wife Sarah set out on their greatest adventure, stepping out in faith. Abraham would not only become the father of a great nation as God had promised him, but he would also become the father of faith.

But wait. Our lesson for the day isn't from Genesis. It is from Romans. We should be talking about the Apostle Paul, not Abraham. What's going on here?

Reading between the lines, it is obvious that Paul was in hot water with the church in Rome. When Paul penned the letter to the Romans, he had not yet visited the Roman church. Word had reached the Romans, though, of Paul's teachings. The teachings struck a raw nerve among those believers of Jewish descent. It was through Paul was teaching against the law. Remember the importance of the law for Jewish people. Even though they were now Christians, many of those of Jewish descent still obeyed the letter of the law. They had heard Paul was teaching the Gentile believers to disregard the law. This upset them a great deal. Paul wrote to the Romans hoping to smooth things over and explain his position.

The Jewish people looked to Moses as the great law giver. Paul suggests a new hero, Abraham, as the example for Christian faith. Abraham, Paul argued, lived his life by faith, believing in God's promise even though it seemed impossible.

Thus, Abraham was saved by faith, and not by the law. Indeed, because of the way he lived his life, Abraham became the father of faith.

YOU SEE, FAITH IS A MATTER OF TRUST. In his first encounter with God, God promises Abraham, “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great.” No wonder Abraham was willing to pick up and move. What a promise—Abraham would be famous. But not only that, he would have as many descendants as there are stars in the sky. Now this was a little sticky. After all, Abraham and Sarah were well past child-bearing age. Paul writes of Abraham, “He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already good as dead.” Abraham had every reason to doubt God’s promise. The only place you ever hear of older couples having babies is on the covers of those supermarket papers. Before God spoke to Abraham, Abraham and Sarah had long since given up having children. But Abraham believed God’s promise and in time, the impossible became a reality. Abraham was one hundred years old, and Sarah was ninety-nine, when she gave birth to their son, Isaac. Faith, first of all, is trust.

Jane McAdams tells about her sixty-nine-year-old mother. Her mother lived through the Great Depression of the 1930’s. It left its mark on her. She was never extravagant with her spending.

Jane’s mother was in the hospital diagnosed with cancer. When Jane met with doctors, her mother was given very little hope. Jane feared when she would have to tell her mother that she was dying. In her struggles, Jane thought to herself, “Should I tell my mother? Did she already know? If not, did she suspect? Could I give her any hope?”

Her mother’s birthday was approaching. Jane thought she would buy her mother a new nightgown, something her mother would have never bought for herself. When she presented the gift, her mother looked at the nightgown for the longest time. “Would you mind returning it to the store?” her mother asked, “I don’t really want it.” Jane was surprised at her mother’s request, and asked her what she would like for her birthday. Her mother pointed to an advertisement for expensive designer summer purses.

Jane admits her reaction was disbelief. Why would her mother, so careful about extravagances, want an expensive summer purse in January, one that she could

not possibly use until June? Jane doubted her mother would live until spring, let alone summer. She came to the realization that what her mother really wanted to know, was how long her daughter thought she would live. Jane went and bought the expensive summer purse. She knew her mother well enough to know that, if possible, she would never let it go to waste.

That was many years ago. The purse is worn out, and long gone, as are at least half a dozen others. The gift of the purse gave her mother a new sense of hope. Jane's mother just celebrated her eighty-third birthday. Jane bought her, you guessed it, the most expensive designer purse she could find. "She'll use it well," Jane says.

There is power in trust. That's where faith begins. Abraham trusted God's promises and was not disappointed. BUT THERE IS A SECOND ELEMENT TO FAITH, AND THAT IS ACCEPTANCE OF GOD'S GRACE.

Abraham was not the great father of faith because he kept the letter of the law, but rather because he lived his life in faith. Abraham was a very imperfect man, as the Genesis writer makes abundantly clear. If he depended on his righteousness to save him, he was doomed, as all of us are doomed. His faith, Paul tells us, "was reckoned to him as righteousness."

One night after super, Stan Gaede asked his sixteen-year-old- cousin, Paul, to go for a drive with him. As they drove over a hill where some road construction was in progress, they collided head-on with another car. Stan's car was totaled. Stan suffered a crushed ankle, broken leg, and shattered jaw in addition to extensive lacerations. He spent most of that night in emergency surgery. Following the accident, Stan spent days in critical condition. They did not tell him for several days that his passenger—his cousin Paul—was dead. The news of Paul's death came as a shock to him. Stan kept asking, "why" the accident had happened.

He was lying in a hospital bed—leg in traction and head swollen beyond recognition—when his father told him that Paul's parents wanted to see him. Stan was in pain—not just physical pain, but a feeling of total forsakenness, and fear, and embarrassment. His mouth was wired shut. With a swollen tongue he was unable to speak. He could only watch as his aunt and uncle—Paul's parents—entered his hospital room. They walked toward his bed and smiled. He wondered how they could be smiling at a time like this. They walked over to his

bed and held his hand. His aunt and uncle whispered in his ear, “You’re our son now, too, you know.”

“Those are words I will never forget,” Stan says., “for they were not words I deserved or expected. They were, of course, words of grace.”

Have you ever experienced such grace? You have if Christ is real in your life—because we are all sinners. If we depended on our righteousness, all of us would be doomed. But we are not doomed. We are people of faith. We have invested our trust in God, and we have accepted His grace. **AND WHAT A DIFFERENCE THIS MAKES.** Perhaps I can dramatize this difference with a story that Robert Morgan told.

A Dutch pastor and his family got into big trouble with the Nazis during the Second World War. The family had been hiding Jews in their home to keep them safe from Hitler. One night in the darkness, they heard the sound of heavy boots and loud, impatient knocking on their door. Their “crime” had been discovered. They were arrested at gunpoint. That night they were placed in a cattle car to be taken to one of the notorious death camps. All night long, they rode in heartbreaking anguish, jostling against one another and the other prisoners who were jammed in the car. They were absolutely terrified. They knew they were going to die in one of Hitler’s extermination centers.

Finally, as daylight was breaking, the train stopped. The doors of the cattle car were opened, and they were marched out. The guards had them line up along the railroad tracks. The pastor’s family looked at one another, knowing they would soon be separated from each other, and led off to certain death. In the midst of their gloom, they discovered some news too good to be true—news beyond belief! They discovered, in the bright morning sunlight, that they were not in a death camp at all. In fact, they were not even in Germany, but in Switzerland! During their night of terror, some courageous and daring person had tripped a switch and sent the train to Switzerland and freedom. Instead of being sent to certain death, they were welcomed to a new life.

That is the message Paul is trying to communicate to Roman Christians. The wages of sin is death, but new life awaits all those who believe in Christ. It’s simply a matter of trust. It is simply accepting God’s grace. It is simply allowing Christ to make the critical difference in your life. **AMEN!!**