

**Series: Joy in the Journey**  
**Today: Abraham-Blessed to be a Blessing**  
**Text: Genesis 12:1-4**

**A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.**  
**Sunday, September 20, 2009**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

As we begin a new series of sermons entitled, *Joy in the Journey*, I am humbled by the story that Billy Graham tells about a time when he arrived early for a crusade meeting so that he could finish a letter to a friend. When the letter was finished, he asked a young boy where the post office was located. The boy gave him the directions and Billy Graham thanked him and said, *'If you come to the meeting tonight, I'll tell you all about being born again and how to get to heaven.'*

The boy said, *'I won't be coming then.'* The evangelist looked surprised and asked the boy why he wouldn't be coming. The boy looked the great man right in the eye and said, *'Mister, you don't even know how to get to the post office. What makes you think you know how to get to heaven?'*

For years now you have heard me pronounce the benediction with these words: *May the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit sustain us as we continue our journey of faith.* I didn't always use those words: *journey of faith.* In fact, when I made my commitment to Jesus Christ 45 years ago, I was pretty confident that I had arrived at the destination God intended for my life. I had been "saved" through the love of God by his sacrifice of his son on the cross of Calvary. I believed that by the power of God, Jesus was raised from the dead to have the final word on the ultimate outcome of my life. In the naiveté of a 19 year old, born again Christian, I was pretty well convinced that this was all I needed to know; that God's unconditional love for me would somehow miraculously put an end to all the insecurities I felt and give me the direction I needed to be successful in life.

After 38 years in the Ministry of Word and Sacrament, I have not changed my mind. I still believe that a faith commitment to follow Jesus is the greatest gift I could give to any of you. Without it, that old chestnut is true: *If you don't stand for something, you will likely fall for anything.*

However, 38 years of ministry have also taught me that faith is a journey, not a destination. We do not always know what life will bring our way, and the answer to all of life's perplexing questions is not particularly satisfying if we say to a brother or sister who is struggling, "*You just have to have faith.*" Faith is a verb, not a noun. It is a journey, not a destination. Faith may be the vehicle through which we negotiate the challenges that life brings, but it is not a set of pat answers to those challenges. We have to come up with those on our own, and our faith is the guide we use to make it through the struggles that life often brings.

This series of sermons which will take us through the program year is a series on some of the great characters of the Bible whose faith will be a guide. They will help us discern for ourselves what it means to follow our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. This morning our focus is on Abraham, who is the father of faith for Jews, Muslims, and Christians.

A few years ago we did a whole series of sermons on Abraham, so to think about summing up his life and faith in one sermon is a bit presumptuous. However, there are a few things that might be helpful for us before we turn to our text for the morning which is the life-shaping moment of his life.

Let's begin by examining his lineage and his name, or to be more correct, his names. Abram was a direct descendent of Noah (whom we will look at next week). He is ten generations removed from the biblical story of God's decision to destroy humankind because of their sinfulness. Noah is a direct descendent of Adam and Eve. In other words, Abram is part of God's great experiment to save human beings from their own sinfulness, and he becomes the new vehicle through which God intends to claim the world as God's own without having to destroy it again.

When we first meet Abraham in Genesis 12, his name is “Abram” which means “*Honored Father.*” However, in Genesis 17 as part of God’s promise to Abraham, God changes his name to Abraham which means “*Father of many nations.*” What is amazing about that name is that when he receives it, he is an old man. His wife, Sarai, is an old woman. They haven’t been able to have any children, so he isn’t even a father of one child let alone many nations, but God is faithful to the promise, and Sarai is also given another name. She becomes Sarah, and in their old age they are given two sons: Isaac and Ishmael. Historically, Isaac has been thought to be the father of Jews, and Ishmael the father of the Palestinians. The two were in conflict with one another for the blessing of their father, and some people trace the roots of the Jewish-Palestinian conflict back to this original conflict between brothers.

Abraham is far from a hero in the faith by any current standards. You may recall that it was out of fear for his life, not his faith in God, that he denied he was even married. He gave Sarah to another man, failed to protect her, and she is nearly killed because of his cowardice. Abraham, like most of the heroes and heroines we will be looking at throughout this series, is very mortal and very frail. They are also chosen by God, just like you and me, to live out a particular mission in their lives.

The part of Abraham’s journey we are focusing on this morning is this wonderful passage in Genesis 12 when God reveals God’s purpose in life for Abraham. It is the story of receiving one’s destiny in a single meeting. Listen again to the words: “*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.*” (Genesis 12:2)

**Blessed to be a Blessing:** does it sound familiar? It was the theme which this congregation used to raise \$2.2 million in 1995 and renovate our Christian Education wing in 1996. The campaign theme focused on the fact that we who are descendents of Abraham have been blessed, and it is therefore our responsibility to be a blessing. There is an outline for us to explore this morning: What does it mean to be blessed by God? What does it mean for us to be a blessing to others?

## Blessed by God

What does it mean to be blessed by God? This morning I want to suggest that it is simply recognizing that we belong to God and God alone; that we have an identity which is secure not because of anything we have done, but because of what God has done for us. The Heidelberg Catechism puts it this way: First it asks the question—*what is the only comfort in life and in death?* And the answer it gives is this: *That I with body and soul, both in life and death, (a) am not my own, (b) but belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.*

Last Sunday evening I was asked to participate in an ordination service for our friend, Jeanne Gay, who preached here in July. When she preached here, she was seeking a call to a church, and there was a committee here to listen to her and interview her after the service. The good news is that we were able to help her receive the call she longed for to the Firelands Presbyterian Church in Ohio. The end of the process was to ordain her to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament, and the service was held in the church I served before coming to Lancaster. The man who succeeded me as pastor, Dr. Ray Roberts, was the preacher for the evening, and I was blessed by his sermon.

Ray asked this question of Jeanne: Why would you do something so foolish as to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ? His sermon was based on first chapter of I Corinthians where Paul says, “*For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing...*” (I Corinthians 1:18). In other words, to believe in the power of God in the world in which Paul lived, and in the world in which we live, is seen as foolishness to those who have not made a commitment to follow Jesus. However, Paul also says that to those of us who are still being saved (note the journey theme—salvation not a destination but a journey), the cross is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

So Ray went on to say to Jeanne who was about to embark on her first call as a pastor: “*The only reason I can give you for engaging in such foolishness is this: the good news of God’s love has the*

*power to transform people's lives.*” And I knew in an instant what he was saying because it is the only thing that has kept me from going off the deep end over and over again in my life. When my parents were divorcing and my family was shattered, it was the power of God that gave me a new family in the church. When my fiancé gave me the ring back and I was devastated, I asked a cute little red head out to satisfy some members of the church I was serving in seminary who wanted me to meet her, and 11 months later we were married. For nearly 40 years she has been a gift of God in my life reminding me regularly of God's unconditional love. When I came to the realization that I had become addicted to alcohol (by coincidence it was 28 years ago today, September 20<sup>th</sup>), my motivation for change came from the knowledge that I was precious to God and that what my life had become was not a healthy way to honor the trust God had placed in me.

To know that you are blessed by God changes the way you go about the decisions you make in your life. If your audience is God and not your peer group, you act differently. If your audience is God and not your customers or your superiors at work, it is going to make a difference in your ethical behavior. If your audience is God and not your own ego, it will change the way you relate to others and to the circumstances which life brings your way.

One of the books I read on vacation was [A Table for Two](#). It is written by our own Alisa Bair, and it tells the story of how her family was able to cope with the death of her 8 year old daughter, Kelly, 16 years ago. To say it is a powerful book is an understatement!

One of the things which sustained Alisa and her family was Kelly's 8 year old faith in the midst of their tragic circumstances. Kelly had a dream toward the end of her life where she saw herself eating with Jesus at a table for two; hence, the name of the book.

The day I returned from vacation, I told Alisa how much her book meant to me. I did not know that it was just a few days before the anniversary of Kelly's death which was 16 years ago today

(September 20<sup>th</sup>). Of course, my comments wound up bringing it all back to her. She wrote me a note telling me how much my words meant to her which ended with these words: *“Thursday night, the children’s ministry meeting I was supposed to go to was cancelled, so I drove to the cemetery, rolled the windows down, and watched a magnificent sunset from my car listening to the Jr. Choir sing Praise You. I can honestly say, despite the raging pain and even swearing at God one time on top of her grave, I have never stopped praising him, thanks to Kelly’s magnificent theophany. Like you said, it really boils down to one thing—nothing can separate us from the love of God. Thank you for being an important part of that truth to our family here on earth these last few years.”*

No matter what the circumstances, in life and in death, we belong, body and soul, to God. This is the promise that Abraham receives, and it changes his life. It can change ours, as well.

### **To Be a Blessing**

With the blessing of knowing that we belong to God comes a responsibility. God says to Abraham, *“I will bless you and make your name great so that you may be a blessing.”* Abraham was blessed so that he might be a blessing to the nation of Israel, and we who have been adopted as Sons and Daughters of Abraham through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ have the same responsibility: to be a blessing to others. The first thing we have to do is to recognize that we are the blessed of God, no matter what circumstance we may find ourselves in.

In the midst of a difficult economy, many of us may not feel blessed, but I need to tell you; it only takes one mission trip to Kenya or Honduras or West Virginia to dispel that attitude. When you live among the poorest of the poor for a week or two, you walk away realizing that the poorest of the poor in America are wealthier than most people in those countries. When you know you are blessed, you can no longer hold back the love of God whether it is in your own generosity or in the sharing of the faith which sustains you with someone else. If we have something we can share and hoard it out of fear

that we won't have enough, we withhold the blessing of God. If we have a faith which will sustain others through the difficult times that life often brings and we do not share it with others as a resource, we withhold the blessing of God.

Among the remembered prayers of the very wise and holy St. Thomas More is this: *"The things, good Lord, which we pray for, give us the grace to labor for."* Leslie Weatherhead tells the story of a little girl who understood this prayer better than anyone else in one of his earlier books. The little girl was much troubled by the fact that her older brother trapped rabbits, and she had begged him in vain to stop. One night her mother heard her praying *"Dear God, please stop Tommy from trapping rabbits. Please don't let them get trapped. They can't. They won't! Amen."* Her mother, troubled and perplexed, asked, "Darling, how can you be so sure that God won't let the rabbits be trapped?" The blessed child calmly replied: "Because I jumped on the traps and sprung them!" [Source: Carroll E. Simcox in *The Christian Century* (March 4, 1987)]

### **Conclusion**

Friends, if you have accepted Jesus Christ as your savior, you share in the blessing of Abraham of knowing that there is nothing in life or in death that will separate you from the love of God. And if that is something you know deep in your heart, then it is your responsibility and mine to share that blessing with others. This is the Journey of Abraham. It is our journey, as well.