

**Father Abraham**  
Romans 4:1-25  
October 22, 2017

**Call to Worship:**

<sup>1</sup> *The LORD reigns, let the nations tremble; he sits enthroned between the cherubim, let the earth shake.*

<sup>2</sup> *Great is the LORD in Zion; he is exalted over all the nations.*

<sup>3</sup> *Let them praise your great and awesome name— he is holy.*

<sup>4</sup> *The King is mighty, he loves justice— you have established equity; in Jacob you have done what is just and right.*

<sup>5</sup> *Exalt the LORD our God and worship at his footstool; he is holy.* Psalm 99:1-5 (NIV)

**Scripture Reading:**

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter? <sup>2</sup> If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. <sup>3</sup> What does Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

<sup>4</sup> Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. <sup>5</sup> However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness. <sup>6</sup> David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: <sup>7</sup> “Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.

<sup>8</sup> Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them.”

<sup>13</sup> It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. <sup>14</sup> For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless, <sup>15</sup> because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.

<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. <sup>17</sup> As it is written: “I have made you a father of many nations.” He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.

<sup>18</sup> Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” <sup>19</sup> Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah’s womb was also dead. <sup>20</sup> Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, <sup>21</sup> being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. <sup>22</sup> This is why “it was credited to him as righteousness.” <sup>23</sup> The words “it was credited to him” were written not for him alone, <sup>24</sup> but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. <sup>25</sup> He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.

Romans 4:1-8, 13-25 (NIV)

So, who is your favorite person in the Bible, besides Jesus? For us men it might be David (the giant slayer, the mighty warrior), perhaps it is Moses (who too killed a man – an Egyptian), or maybe it is the apostle Paul (whom I said last week at least had a role in the deaths of some very early Christians). I am starting to sense a pattern☺. Or for the women, it might be Ruth or Esther from the Old Testament, or maybe Mary, the mother of Jesus, from the New Testament. For how many might it be Abraham? Yet, the Bible tells us that he is our father, through faith.

While there are certain themes in Paul's letter to the early Christians in Rome which are repeated often, like "saved by faith and not by the law or works," "righteousness," and "justification," there is also a progression. He began his letter with a brief introduction to the Good News, then he tells us that no human being is righteous before God – neither Jew or Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, which is meant to include everyone, that "no one is righteous, not even one." Not meaning that there is not any good in people, but we cannot make ourselves right before God, who is the perfect one. God is the only true righteous one. Then last week we finally got to the Good News – that while we can't earn or make ourselves right before God, either by our works or by obeying the Law, God has extended to each of us the gift of His own Son, Jesus Christ, who although he himself was the only righteous one who walked the face of this earth, took upon himself the penalty for all mankind's sin in his death on the cross. And that salvation, righteousness, justification all come through faith in Him:

*But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*

Romans 3:21-24 (NIV)

There you have it! The entire Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ in three verses.

Then we get to our passage this morning, Romans 4, and Paul gives us an example of one who was saved, made righteous, and justified before God by faith, and he comes from the Old Testament, actually very early on in the Bible story, even before the Law of God was given, Abraham:

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Paul gives us arguably the greatest example of human faithfulness – Abraham. There is a reason why many of you who grew up in the church know and have sung the song Father Abraham. I did not so I had to go to the internet to look the lyrics up:

*Father Abraham has many sons  
Many sons had Father Abraham  
I am one of them and so are you  
So, let's all praise the Lord.*

Well, father Abraham eventually did have a son, and then another, and then lots and lots of descendants, but things didn't start out very well for him being a parent, at least for the first 86 years of his life.

The first we read about Abraham in the Bible is in Genesis 11 when his name is Abram and we find out he is a descendant of Noah from the line of Noah's son, Shem. Which when you think about it, everyone born after the great flood had to be a descendant of Noah. At the end of Genesis 11 we learn that Abram was from the land of Ur, and he along with his father Terah ended up in Haran, on their way to Canaan.

At the beginning of Genesis 12 it says:

*The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples will be blessed through you." Genesis 12:1-3*

Abram was 75 years old at the time and he had yet to have any children of his own, though the name Abram means, "exalted father." By now Abram has probably been long thinking that his mother and father misnamed him. Why God chose Abram, as opposed to any other potential candidate, we don't know. Abram was God's sovereign choice. Most likely God knew Abram's potential, what was inside of him.

*So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot (his nephew) went with him . . . He took his wife Sarai, Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there. Genesis 12:4-5*

At the time of Abram's calling Ur was one of the most prosperous and important areas in the world. It was also one of the most pagan cities. Often those two seem to go hand in hand. Haran was just a step away, both in distance and in culture. Abram and his family were probably pretty well off, they had accumulated possessions and acquired people. And God wants them to set off for the great unknown, mostly desert land. Just the fact that Abram did what God had asked him to do shows his character. Either that or God's calling must have been rather convincing. Not too many men in their right mind would leave their country (a prosperous one at that), his relatives and his immediate family for an unknown destination without being convinced of the rightness of the decision. And one of the first things that Abram does when he gets to the land where God had led them, "he built an altar to the LORD and called on His name" (Gen. 12:8).

But shortly after they are there a famine sets in and Abram begins to take matters into his own hands. He sets out for Egypt, a land known at the time for its abundance. Throughout the Bible Egypt is a place where God's people often went to seek refuge. Even in the New Testament, Mary & Joseph took their baby Jesus there to escape King Herod's wrath. They went because Joseph had received word from God through an angel in a dream. For Abram that was probably not the case, he tried to take matters in his own hands. But even before he gets there Abram starts

anticipating problems. Because Sarai was a beautiful woman, even at 65 (remember people lived into their hundreds in the day so I am sure they didn't age as fast as today), Abram feared that her presence could be dangerous for him. For who? For him!

So he comes up with this plan to have Sarai say that she is his sister, otherwise if they find out she's his wife, they might kill him and someone might take her for their wife. He tells Sarai, "please say that you are my sister so that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may live on account of you." Hardly seems like the words and plan of a righteous man! At least he didn't completely lie because Sarai was his sister, his half-sister. They had the same father but a different mother. It was a half truth. But because of the half-lie, Pharaoh notices Sarai's beauty and takes her in to be one of his many wives. Abram's strong desire to save his own life caused him to be willing to give up his own wife. Again, it hardly seems like something a righteous man would do!

It wasn't until God stepped in and inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household, and Pharaoh finally learns that she was Abram's wife, that he sent them on their way, back to the land where God had originally called Abram to go.

God's faithful servant Abram had only been partially faithful up to this point. Yes he did leave the land of Ur but he didn't leave all his descendants behind. He probably took his father, Terah, with him to Haran, that which slowed him down for many years. And then he took his nephew Lot with him into Canaan, a decision that would have serious consequences. In the meantime he took it upon himself to go to Egypt and he gave up his own wife for a while trying to save his own life. Hardly seems like the things a faithful and righteous man would do.

Fortunately God is faithful so in Genesis 15 we have him speaking to Abram once again:

*After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision. "Do not be afraid Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward . . . a son coming from your own body will be your heir." The LORD took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars – if indeed you can count them, so shall your offspring be." **Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.***  
Genesis 15:1-6 (NIV)

It is at this point in the story of Abram that his faith is credited to him as righteousness. I would like to say that Abram no longer acted out of his own self interest and never took matters into his own hands again, but I can't.

So, after Sarai urges him to take her servant, Hagar, as a substitute mother, he obliges. It made sense. While God promised Abram that a son would come from "his own body," God had never said Sarai would be the mother, and after all she had never been able to have children and she was well past her child bearing years. And for women in that day who could not have children, allowing a maidservant to bear the husband a child, was an acceptable practice. But allowing Hagar to bear Abram a child would have drastic consequences, both immediate and for thousands of years to come – even up to this day. The birth of Ishmael, Abram's illegitimate son, has affected world history ever since. Ishmael's descendants extend all the way to today to many of the Arab nations who continue to remain in conflict with the Israelites, those who trace their

ancestry back to the legitimate son. Again, these are not the actions of one whom you would call a faithful and righteous man. And Abram should have been able to realize that he was not doing things in God's will, because he doesn't hear from God again for thirteen years.

*When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. <sup>2</sup> Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers."*

*<sup>3</sup> Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, <sup>4</sup> "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. <sup>5</sup> No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. <sup>6</sup> I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. <sup>7</sup> I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. <sup>8</sup> The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God."* Genesis 17:1-8 (NIV)

This time God specifically tells Abram, now Abraham, that Sarai, his wife is going to be the mother of the children, and Sarai's name will now be Sarah – "the mother of nations." What was Abraham's response to that? He fell facedown and laughed (v. 17). Again, hardly seems like the response of a faithful and righteous man.

Abram was 75 years old when he left Haran to go to Canaan, 86 years old when he took matters into his own hands and fathered a child with his wife's maidservant Hagar, and now 99 years old when God is finally ready to deliver on His promise.

Something very significant is going on here. It is the first time that God identifies himself as God Almighty (El Shaddai) and he changes the names of Abram & Sarai to Abraham and Sarah. And he says to Abram, "*I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless.*" The change in their relationship – between God and Abram & Sarai – was not because of Abram and Sarai's faithfulness, it was because of God's faithfulness.

And God finally blesses Abraham and Sarah with a son of their own, Isaac:

*Now the LORD was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah what he had promised. <sup>2</sup> Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. <sup>3</sup> Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him. <sup>4</sup> When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him. <sup>5</sup> Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.* Genesis 21:1-5 (NIV)

Think of all the pain that could have been avoided if Abram & Sarai would have been patient and just trusted completely in God and his promises. We too often get side tracked in our journeys of faith. God is always calling us to come back, to get back on track because God is always the more faithful one, but we still have to live with the consequences of the decisions we make walking outside of God's will.

God saves Abraham's greatest test of faith for last. Abraham was finally blessed with his long awaited son, Isaac. God had finally fulfilled his long awaited promise to Abraham, in God's time and in God's way. And we get to Genesis 22 and we read: *Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. <sup>2</sup> Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you."* Genesis 22:1-2 (NIV)

It was (and is) one of the greatest tests that any parent will ever face. Do you have enough faith in God and are you willing to trust Him with the life of your child or children?

God had promised Abraham that He would establish His covenant with Isaac. And it was an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. Isaac was the promised seed, the product of a miraculous conception. The shadow of something better to come. Abraham's future children were to come from Isaac. And now God was asking Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. It was a command from God that by human standards makes no sense at all. It wasn't a request, it was a command. Abraham only has two choices – obedience or disobedience. The choice to obey would mean total obedience to every word God had spoken. And that was the choice Abraham made! Abraham had come a long ways on his faith journey. If God would have blessed Abraham & Sarah with Isaac right after they left Ur, when they lived in Haran, do you think Abraham would have obeyed at that time? Or how about when they first arrived in Canaan, before his experience with Pharaoh in Egypt, do you think he would have obeyed then? Or, how about before the experience with Hagar? I don't think so.

But this time Abraham obeys and it doesn't take him very long. It says in Genesis 22:3 "that he rose early the next morning" and began the journey to carry out what God had told him to do." For three long days, hand in hand, Abraham and Isaac journeyed together, along with two of Abraham's servants. I don't know how he did it but somewhere along the way Abraham went from someone who struggled to put his complete faith in trust in God to someone who trusted him to somehow save his son.

When questioned by his son, Abraham responds:

*"God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son."* Gen. 22:8

We almost all know the ending of the story, God provides a different sacrifice – a ram caught in the thickets behind him.

God's words to Abraham – *"Now I know that you fear God, because you have not even withheld from me your son, your only son."* Gen. 22:12

There is so much in the story of Abraham and Isaac which is about God providing the future sacrifice for the sins of all who believe, His only Son. And the story is mostly about God's faithfulness to Abraham. But it's also a *story* about Abraham's faithfulness and how it grew during his journey after answering God's call upon his life.

I like the words to Romans 4:20 in the ESV

*<sup>20</sup> No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God,<sup>21</sup> fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. <sup>22</sup> That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.” <sup>23</sup> But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone,<sup>24</sup> but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord,<sup>25</sup> who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.*

The truth is, none of us who have answered God’s call upon our lives to repent of our own sinfulness, to put all our faith and trust in Jesus for salvation and to follow him, know how God might test our faith along the journey. Will we obey His word, or will we choose the ways that the rest of the world is choosing? Will we be faithful, especially when it really gets difficult? Or will we look to our own selfish desires and try to take matters into our own hands? As we journey together may we look to Abraham as our example, the Father of our Faith, recognizing that he was not perfect, nor are we, that we are made righteous only by what God has done for us and that God is always the more faithful one.