

Ninth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/C): "Faith: A Lifelong Marathon of Trust"
Genesis 15:1-6; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40
August 10-11, 2019
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

A couple of our church friends collect and regularly pass along to me Bible-themed cartoons. One of my favorites is a picture of 2 unicorns in bed. The male unicorn is reading the newspaper, with a front-page article about a huge storm front approaching. The female unicorn is painting her nails and commenting, "I'm sure glad we didn't go on the cruise with that whack-job Noah!"

This weekend's 2nd lesson from the 11th chapter of the letter to the Hebrews skips from verse 3 to verse 8. "That whack-job Noah" shows up in the deleted section:

By faith, Noah built a ship in the middle of dry land. He was warned about something he couldn't see, and acted on what he was told. The result? His family was saved. His act of faith drew a sharp line between the evil of the unbelieving world and the rightness of the believing world. As a result, Noah became intimate with God. (Hebrews 11:7, The Message)

(If you've never heard the Bill Cosby routine of God speaking to Noah about building an ark in his driveway, Google it!)

Hebrews 11 is a **Bible gem about faith**, trust in God that's so deep it drives decisions and shapes lives. In one chapter we hear 18 times the refrain of "by faith...." Most of what we hear in today's epistle is about Abraham (and Sarah, who comes in as a distant second....).

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. (Hebrews 11:8)

(Reminds me of Frodo in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. At the Council of Elrond the little hobbit agrees to carry the Ring of Power to Mordor to destroy it in the Crack of Doom, saying, "I will go, though I do not know the way.") The author of Hebrews goes on to say:

By faith, barren Sarah was able to become pregnant, old woman as she was at the time, because she believed the One who made a promise would do what he said. That's how it happened that from one man's dead and shriveled loins there are now people numbering into the millions. (Hebrews 11:11-12, The Message)

So Abraham and Sarah get high praise for being faith-filled, even though their trust in God did indeed waver. I'm not mentioning this to draw a mustache on the Mona Lisa, just to say they were as human as we are, so there's hope for us, too, despite the fact we don't spend **all** our time on the mountain top of faith. We, too, occasionally dip into the valley of doubt.

So in the lesson from Genesis the Lord announces to Abram (he isn't Abraham yet, because Isaac, the son of promise, hasn't been born):

"Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." (Genesis 15:1b)

Such an announcement should be met with great joy and deep thanks, right?? Oh, no.

Instead of all kinds of grateful, Abram is salty:

"GOD, Master, what use are your gifts as long as I'm childless and Eliezer of Damascus is going to inherit everything?... See, you've given me no children, and now a mere house servant is going to get it all." (Genesis 15:2-3, The Message)

'Doesn't sound like someone whose trust in God's faithfulness, God's keeping of promises, should be held up as a shining example, right? God had promised 75-year-old Abram that he would *"make of [him] a great nation... make [his] name great...."* (Gen. 12:2), but the years passed and his wife seemed as barren as ever.... So when she suggested that Abram have a child with her slave-girl, Hagar, he agreed. Their son was Ishmael and it's another whole sermon to tell the tale of how poorly Hagar and Ishmael were ultimately treated by

Sarai & Abram -- a story many people reference to explain the historic hatred between Arabs and Jews.

The thing is: Abram & Sarai had a hard time believing God's promise would come true, so they colored outside the lines and everyone suffered for it. But **ultimately** they trusted, and the son of promise, Isaac, was born, and the story unfolded (maybe **not** exactly as divinely intended), and Abraham & Sarah are praised in the letter to the Hebrews as great exemplars of faith.

We're pretty much like them, right? Faith is an ongoing, lifelong marathon in trust, not a one-and-done spiritual sprint. Like Abram/Abraham, we wax and wane in our trusting. A time-lapse photo of our faith journey would reveal us alternately ascending peaks of belief and descending into valleys of doubt. There is One who travels with us, though, up and down, year in, year out, allowing every "dead end" to become an entry door into fuller faith and more abundant life.

Having faith is believing that what hasn't happened yet **will** happen, because God has promised it. Having faith is moving ahead boldly, cooperating with the Kingdom coming as Scripture and Jesus describe it.

In today's Gospel our Lord Jesus tells us how to live lives of faith, not just by waiting patiently but by acting passionately:

"Be generous. Give to the poor. Get yourselves a bank that can't go bankrupt, a bank in heaven far from bank robbers, safe from embezzlers, a bank you can bank on." (Luke 12:33, *The Message*)

Sometimes we're afraid that the safe space of God's embrace will actually be a stranglehold. Sometimes we're afraid that generously sharing our earthly treasures is somehow going to leave us without. Then we need to remember and repeat our Lord Jesus' promise:

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” (Luke 12:32)

We affirm that this kingdom comes now, not just later. It comes when we live in joyful anticipation of glad fulfillment of holy promises. It comes when we trust so deeply in God’s care that we generously pass along the material blessings we receive, knowing that daily bread comes from on high and will not cease until we reach *“a better country, that is, a heavenly one.”* (Hebrews 11:16a) To be prepared for our Lord’s return is to trust God and love our neighbor, by God’s grace, each day of our lives. It is to remember that “Where our treasure is, there our heart will be also.”

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham