

"Wavering Faith"  
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Romans 4:13-25

Abraham! Ancestor to a multitude of nations! Revered by three great world religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the three monotheistic religions, all of whom trace their spiritual ancestry back to Abraham.

Abraham is held up in the Bible as the prime example of what it means to have faith. Listen to the glowing language the Apostle Paul uses to describe Abraham's faith:

*Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations...." He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead...or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.* Romans 4:18-21

Hoping against hope....

Did not weaken....

No distrust made him waver....

Fully convinced....

I don't mean at all to disparage Abraham, our ancestor in the faith, nor do I want to suggest that the Apostle Paul was wrong. But one has to wonder if the great Apostle didn't get a little carried away with his thought, and overstate the case a bit, as preachers are wont to do. It is an occupational hazard, making it sound better than it really is. Preachers often do that. Get carried away. Oversell faith! Sometimes oversell Jesus! And I just wonder if that is what is going on here with the Apostle Paul's rhapsodic description of Abraham's faith.

Did he forget certain parts of the story? Did he forget, for instance, the part where Abraham fell over laughing? Even the lectionary editors left it out of our reading for today. It comes right after God tells Abraham that he, at age 99, is going to be the ancestor of a multitude of nations and that it is his wife Sarah, who is pushing 91, is going to have a son. This is what the writer says happened when God told this to Abraham:

*Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" And Abraham said to God, "O that Ishmael might live in your sight!"* Genesis 17:17-18

He laughed. Not just a snicker or a smile. It was a deep belly laugh. He fell over laughing! He laughed until his sides ached and he had trouble catching his breath. As Fredrick Buechner puts it, he laughed at the idea of Sarah having a baby in the geriatric ward and Medicare picking up the tab!<sup>1</sup>

Never wavered? Fully convinced? I don't know, but that sounds like wavering to me. And it sounds less than fully convinced.

Did the Apostle Paul forget about the part where Abraham tried to convince God that God should forget about Sarah having a baby and to just let Ishmael, his son by Hagar, be the one through whom these multitudes of nations would come forth? Why bother Sarah?

The trouble with turning Abraham into a giant of unwavering faith is that it removes him from the world that you and I live in. It makes him into something other than human. It perpetuates the myth that people who have real faith are people who live above it all, who breeze through life without a care, who never give in to questions or doubts. And it suggests that if your faith is not as bright and shining as all that, then it is not real faith.

Nine years ago now, when we were getting ready to move to Auburn from Cedar Rapids, getting ready to leave the community where we had lived for 13 years and the church we had grown to love, in the middle of all of the stress of selling, buying, moving, and so on, Diane told an acquaintance of hers that there had been some nights when neither of us was able to get to sleep. This person happened to be, as we like to say, “unchurched,” meaning someone who does not attend church.

The funny thing about this story is that, like Abraham, this woman got a big laugh out of it. It struck her as particularly humorous that a minister and his wife, two people who are about as churched as people can be, should allow themselves to get into a dither over moving. Well, we are always happy to be able to brighten someone’s day. But as I thought about it, it occurred to me that what made it funny to the this woman was that she had the idea that people who are religious or who have faith or who are into organized religion, are somehow supposed to be untouched by the struggles and anxieties that face ordinary people. Of course, maybe we should have been more trusting. Maybe it shouldn’t have gotten to us like it did. The truth is our faith did help us. I personally turned often to the Apostle Paul’s words in Philippians: “Be anxious about nothing....” “Do not worry about anything....” And sometimes it helped. But then there were nights when a sleeping pill helped a lot more.

Abraham is a good example of faith not because he never wavered but precisely because he did waver, because it didn’t come easily, because he struggled, and in the end still believed. And that is the way it is with most of us. Abraham models the kind of faith that I think is available to any of us, the kind that, in fact

- does waver at times,
- does start thinking up alternative solutions,
- does cry out in despair on occasion,
- and on other occasions, falls over laughing

at the sheer absurdity of what it is that one is expected to believe.

I don’t know if you have heard about the Atheist Bus Campaign in England begun by a woman who is a comedian with help from the Oxford zoologist, Richard Dawkins, who has written a book called *The God Delusion*. The campaign has put signs on buses in England that say: “There is probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.” They came in response to some fundamentalist ads quoting Scripture and talking about hell and punishment. The promoters of the atheist ads expected and predicted anger and a backlash from believers. But instead, the response from most faith leaders was quite different. One person said, “If Socrates said the unexamined life is not worth living, they say, the ads remind (us) that an unexamined faith is not a real faith, and people need to think, and even pray, more deeply.” The Rev. Stephen Wang of the Westminster diocese of the Roman Catholic Church said: “Many people simply never think about God or religion as a serious question, and if this prods them a little bit, then that’s great.” And there was a quote from Reinhold Niebuhr who said that he preferred honest agnostics to overly pious believers.<sup>2</sup>

One of the published sermons of Harry Emerson Fosdick, who preached for a time at First Presbyterian Church in New York City in the early part of the last century, is entitled: "On Finding It Hard to Believe in God."<sup>3</sup> It is a great sermon. He says several helpful things. First, he says, "No one believes in all of God. No one can. All of God is too vast to be comprehended by anybody's faith. We cannot even believe in all of the universe. How can we? It is too great. As was said of Mrs. Einstein, she did not understand Mr. Einstein's ideas of relativity, but – what was more important to her – she understood Mr. Einstein." He suggests: "believe in as much of God as you can." For himself he says, "I am not called on to believe in all of God. I cannot. (God) is too great. But as for disbelieving all that the word 'God' stands for, I cannot do that either – not even on dark days....'God,' says the New Testament, 'is love.' So there is always some of God we can get at and believe in." That resonates with me.

There are some days when I have no trouble believing in God and in all of the best that goes with that belief. And then there are other days, no so much. We live, much like Abraham did, somewhere between the promise and the fulfillment. We live between hope and hopelessness. As one writer puts it: "it is our hopelessness (as much as it is our hope) that brings us to church of a Sunday...."<sup>4</sup>

Maybe somewhere there is someone who has the kind of faith that the Apostle Paul claimed for Abraham, the kind that never waivers. But real faith, for me, does not require that. I relate more to the kind of faith expressed so eloquently by the man who came to Jesus once asking him to heal his son. The man said to Jesus, "if you are able, please heal my son." Jesus said it's not whether I am able but whether you can believe. All things can be done for the one who believes. And the man cried out: "I believe. Help my unbelief." Mark 9:20-27

One thing that the woman who laughed at our anxiety didn't understand, I think, is what it means to be part of a faith community. What she didn't know is that when we who are in the church waver, there are others there to give support. We had a lot of help in those stressful days. Cards, notes, prayers, words of encouragement. Advice like: "Remember to put your socks on before your shoes." A card that said: "The Lord blesseth those who stressteth." One person who kept reassuring me with these words: "Don't worry about it. Everything is going to fall into place." And of course, as it turned out, everything did.

Abraham, a great example of faith? Yes, I think so. Not because he never wavered but precisely because he did waver, and yet in the end found a way to believe. Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.

<sup>1</sup> *Telling the Truth – The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy & Fairy Tale*, p. 50

<sup>2</sup> Christian Science Monitor, 1/16/09

<sup>3</sup> H. E. Fosdick, *Successful Christian Living*

<sup>4</sup> F. Buechner, *Telling the Truth*, p.55