

FIRST LESSON: Genesis 12:1-4
SECOND LESSON: Romans 4:1-5; 13-17
March 5, 2023
SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

“Abraham”

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Have you ever heard anyone launch into a diatribe? Diatribe is a polite way of saying a rant today. Something winds a person up and there is no stopping them. My mother was really good at that when we were kids. Once she got started there was no stopping her. Modern diatribes don't have much in the way of structure. They are generally really long and loud complaints about why someone or something is completely and utterly wrong. Mom could find a thousand ways to express the error of my ways when I was a teenager. But originally a diatribe was an ancient form of speech that had rules. It was a rant with structure. It was long. It was usually, but not always, spoken. An ancient diatribe sometimes used imaginary opponents, as in, “you may say this but . . .” or “someone has said, but . . .”. There's often a rhetorical question and answer format where the person asks a question and then answers it themselves. *My mother had that one down.* Sometimes, famous figures are drawn into the mix to be used to make a point. The closest we got to that was, “*When I was your age . . .*” But classically speaking, a diatribe is an argument that uses both logic and appeals to emotion. And yes, in case you hadn't noticed, Paul in Romans is in the middle of a full-blown diatribe. I find all the complicated arguments and back and forth exhausting, but it's a style that would have been recognizable to his peers.

Paul was writing to the churches in Rome, a diverse group. Some were Jewish believers and others Gentiles. This was early days and there were tensions. And one of the most basic questions from the Jewish-Christian point of view was, how large is Abraham's family? Is it just the Jews, or more than the Jews? Abraham was the father of many nations, but Jewish tradition stressed that Abraham was the father of the Jews. Period. The covenant promises made to Abraham were for the Jews only. End of story. Paul flatly contradicted this traditional Jewish teaching about Abraham.

Paul argued in his diatribe that Abraham's children are all who have faith. Biologically the Jews were heirs of Abraham, but by faith that number is much larger. It could be argued that even biologically Abraham's heirs include all of the Arab peoples, but Paul was not interested in that. Paul's argument was about faith, and it turned on one line found in our Old Testament reading this morning, “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” and one Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures. From these two things Paul launches into a long, complicated argument. If it feels like he's having a debate with himself

that's because he is. He is offering two sides of a story and then "proving" one wrong.

To be a child of Abraham meant being heir to the promises given to Abraham, and Paul neatly sidesteps physical descent to argue for faith. Abraham, says Paul, was not "justified" before God by works but by faith. The Rabbis would argue that Genesis 26: 4-5 makes it clear that God gave Isaac a blessing because Abraham obeyed and kept all of God's requirements, commandments, statutes and laws. That certainly *looks* like works. In Judaism obedience to the Law determines a person's relationship to God. The fact that all these laws did not exist during the days of Abraham is irrelevant. God's moral law still filled the universe. But Paul says it is not Abraham's obedience that made him right with God, but his faith. The faith came **before** the obedience. Abraham would never have obeyed God **if he did not first believe**. Abraham was a faithful servant because of his faith.

Now it would be nice if Paul just stopped there, but no, he then had to go into a whole lot of language about crediting righteousness, which doesn't really resonate with us. This is banking language. He's continuing the debate, but he's shifting imagery. Paul quotes from Genesis 15:6. The Greek version of the Old Testament he quotes from used a specific accountant's word which I won't trouble you with because you'll never need it. The translation is "credited." "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." It's as if I had a huge debt and someone went to the bank and paid it off for me. My account has been credited. I can't claim I'm great because I earned the money to pay it off. It was a gift. Everything Abraham had from God was not something he earned. He didn't receive from God because he was perfect. He didn't even receive from God because he had faith. **But faith opened the door to him receiving God's grace.**

Now it could also be argued as an aside, that Abraham was NOT perfect. If you know anything about Abraham you know that he tried to pass his wife off as his sister not just once, but TWICE, because he was afraid that local rulers would be so taken with her beauty that they would kill him to get her. And the second time the ruler did take Sarah as his wife only to have to hand her back! Abraham also let himself get talked into having a child with Sarah's servant Hagar when Sarah could not get pregnant, and later he completely turned his back on Hagar and his own son Ishmael who he loved when Sarah threw them out. Abraham might have trusted God enough to take some drastic actions in his life, but when it came to inter-personal relationships, he won no prizes.

So let's break down the rest of Paul's "rant" into pieces we can actually understand, because it gets worse. I would like to think that we are the only ones who struggle with Paul, but apparently even his contemporaries did. 2 Peter contains this huge understatement about Paul: **"His letters contain some things that are hard to understand . . ."** (2 Peter 3:16) Moving on to the even more "hard to understand" is the next section.

Paul says, "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. For if those who depend on the law are

heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless, because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression. 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.”

I know. **Your eyes are glazing over.** So here's the translation of all that: Abraham didn't get his position with God through keeping the law, and neither do we. We can get right with God through faith. If the only people God accepts are Abraham's biological heirs then there is no point in having faith. And as for the Law, no one can keep the Law. It's not the answer either because the Law will only bring judgment, or “wrath.” And . . . random . . . if we don't have rules we can't break them. We are saved by faith so God's grace can be given to everyone, not just the Jews.

Paul argues like a Pharisee. He argues using all of the legalistic minutiae that was important to his peers and irrelevant to us, which is why we find Paul so frustrating. We don't base entire arguments on the translation of one word from the Hebrew to the Greek, but they did. Modern day Jews do not believe that the only way to be accepted by God is to be able to perfectly keep the Law in every detail. Even the Orthodox offer more grace than that. But Paul painted everything in black and white terms because Paul was engaged in a diatribe. He was making an impassioned appeal to both logic and emotion.

Despite the fact that the apostle Paul truly gets on my nerves, there is something compelling about the heart of his argument. Faith does come before action. Abraham would have never left his home and gone off to follow God to a new and strange place if he did not first have faith in God. **Faith opens the door.** Abraham's power is not found in his perfection. He wasn't perfect. It is found in his faith. But we have to be careful that faith doesn't just take the place of keeping the law as another standard to meet, because in the minds of some it does just that.

People doubt that they have been forgiven by God, because they don't have enough faith. People are told that they, or a loved one, has not been healed, because they don't have enough faith. Every time we turn around it seems we're being told to have faith. And the result of all this emphasis on faith is that doubt terrifies us. If we doubt, we fear we might be lost forever. **But everyone doubts.** I don't care who you are. And it is okay to doubt. God is not afraid of our questions. God will not punish us for having doubts. The most famous pastors in the world experience times of doubt. To have doubt is to be human. To never doubt at all, is probably to be psychotic. Faith opens us to receive from God. It does not earn us a place with God. That comes purely by grace.

Abraham said yes to God by faith. His walk with God began. But Abraham's faith did not sustain him, God's grace sustained him. Faith opens the door to the kingdom of God, but it is God's grace and love that brings us in and welcomes us home. Amen.

Genesis 12:1-4

12 The Lord had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

2 “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.

3 I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.”

4 So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran.

Romans 4:1-5; 13-17

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

4 Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. **5** However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.

13 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. **14** For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless,^{**15**} because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.

16 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. **17** 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.