

“Doubts”

The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – August 7, 2022

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

I’m amazed that a 75-year-old man would take his wife, leave his hometown, and move to a foreign country with no promise whatsoever of a future when he got there. What would motivate a man to do that? In this case, it was God’s prodding. God simply said to Abraham, “I WILL BLESS YOU. I WILL BE WITH YOU.” That doesn’t make sense! Why not a younger man? And what about Sarah, Abraham’s wife? To leave lifelong friends and family — that’s asking a lot. But Abraham listened to God. And he went.

The writer of *Hebrews*, reflecting on that historic move, said: *BY FAITH ABRAHAM OBEYED WHEN WE 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.*

The author continues on and on about Abraham. In essence, he is saying: “Folks, this is what faith looks like.”

On the one hand, the story of Abraham’s journey of faith is quite an inspiration to me. On the other hand, it’s very discouraging. Why? Because when I reflect on some of the major-league people of God in the Bible – like Abraham – I get an inferiority complex. “I can never have faith like that! I’m too wishy washy.”

Do you ever feel that way? I’m sure many of you have. Perhaps you too need to be reminded that even the great ones of faith had their times of doubt. That’s right! Even the great ones of the faith didn’t wake up every morning saying, “*THIS IS THE DAY THAT GOD HAS MADE. I WILL REJOICE AND BE GLAD IN IT!*”

We are told that Abraham was a man of faith. He picks up his tent and moves to a land he does not own but is promised to him. He leaves everything in faith and God’s promises to give him land and children. But we must also understand that Abraham and his wife Sarah are quite past the age to be first-time parents. And after a time of waiting, I am sure his faith began to wear away.

He set up his possessions to be inherited by a trusted servant. Sarah didn’t believe she could conceive so she allowed Abraham to sleep with her personal servant. She reasoned that this way at least they would have an heir that was a bit more legitimate than a mere servant. Out of this union, came the son Ishmael.

My reason for bringing up this ancient story is to again illustrate the fact that even the great ones of the Bible had times in their lives when faith was put to such an extreme test, that it was virtually nonexistent. I am not putting down Abraham. I can identify with him. Abraham is thinking, “Were past the childbearing years. We’d better take things into our own hands.” Yet, the record is clear. Abraham blinked. He doubted. He didn’t think that God was going to make good on what He had promised. We, of course, know the rest of the story. Abraham and Sarah were indeed blessed with a son. We know him as Isaac. And thus began the fulfillment of God’s promises.

Or how about John the Baptist, who boldly proclaimed that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the one people had been waiting for – The Messiah – the promised one! Loudly and confidently, he pointed to Jesus and said: *HERE IS THE LAMB OF GOD WHO TAKES AWAY THE SINS OF THE WORLD.*

Is it inconceivable that this fiery preacher could ever have doubts about God’s promises? Not likely. Yet, after John the Baptist was arrested and put into prison by King Herod, his confident faith began to erode. He sent word to Jesus and asked: *ARE YOU THE ONE WHO IS TO COME, OR ARE WE TO WAIT FOR ANOTHER?*

In essence, John the Baptist is saying: “Reassure me, Jesus. I’ve put my life on the line to proclaim you as the Messiah of God. Reassure me, Jesus, that you are indeed the promised one.”

So, you see, even the great ones of faith like Abraham and John the Baptist have their doubts. Is this bothersome or upsetting? Not for me! Rather, it encourages me to not be too hard on myself when doubts and questions come into my life.

Do you ever have doubts about God and his promises? If so, do you then get down on yourself and think you’re a second-class Christian because you’re not always upbeat and strong in your faith? Think about Abraham, eulogized in Hebrews, Chapter 11, as a role model of faith. He, too, had times when he doubted God’s presence and promises. Think about John the Baptist. This saint of faith had his times of doubting too.

John the Baptist, however, gives us a proactive model as to what we should do when our faith begins to waver. From his jail cell, John contacted Jesus. Our contact point is in prayer. I’ve found that prayerful conversations with God have helped me work through those spiritual valleys so that my faith is renewed and strengthened. Sometimes it just allows me to open my mind to let God work instead of me demanding God to work the way I think God should work in this world.

Speaking of prayer, I've found that we so often believe, the Lord has not heard us when our prayers are not answered in some dramatic and miraculous way. The older I get, the more I realize that God so often works through other people to answer those prayers.

Let me illustrate with this classic story about a man named Henry. He lived in a valley near a river. The river had reached flood stage. Everyone was being evacuated to higher ground. Everyone, that is, except Henry.

He was staying at his house and was not leaving it. Why? He was absolutely convinced that God would take care of him. Well, the water kept rising and soon it was up to his porch. Some of his friends paddled by in a rowboat. Henry was sitting on the windowsill. "We've come to save you." Henry wouldn't budge. "God will save me," Henry said.

It wasn't too much longer; the waters had risen several more feet. Henry was now stranded on the second floor of the house. A rescue team came in a motorboat. As Henry waved to the people from the second floor, they shouted to him. "Henry, we've come to save you!" Henry said, "Don't worry about me. God will save me."

Meanwhile, the flood waters rose higher and higher. Henry was now forced to sit on his roof. A helicopter came and hovered overhead and someone shouted through a megaphone: "Henry, we're letting down a rope ladder. Grab it before it is too late!"

Henry wouldn't budge. The water kept rising and Henry died.

When Henry entered the gates of heaven, the Lord met him. Henry said: "Lord, I'm glad to meet you, but frankly, I am very disappointed in you. I prayed to you and counted on you to save me, but you let me down."

The Lord shook his head and said: "Henry, I sent a rowboat, a motorboat, and a helicopter to save you. What more did you want me to do?"

When your faith is shaken, pray to the Lord. Know that He hears you and will indeed answer your prayers. Sometimes the answer will come in a dramatic and miraculous way. Other times, he'll work through people. Henry didn't know that. We do. Thank you, Lord. Amen.