

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
March 8, 2009
Rev. Bob Garrard
Worship Theme:

Worship Theme: Trusting Our Future to God,
Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-16, Romans 4: 13-25 , Mark 8: 31-38

“There’s a story about a Bible translator in India, who was working to translate the New Testament into one of the many dialects of the subcontinent. He was looking for a word for ‘faith,’ and was having a difficult time of it. One day, a young boy of the village came into his study. Hunched over his manuscript, the missionary waved the lad over to a chair in the corner, saying he’d be with him shortly. He looked up, moments later, to find the boy walking around the chair, looking at it from every angle, but not sitting on it. The missionary repeated, ‘Have a seat and I’ll be with you in a moment.’ The boy continued to examine the chair in amazement.”

“Then the Bible translator realized what was going on. This was such a primitive village that the boy had never in his life seen a western-style chair. He wasn’t sure he could sit on such a flimsy-looking thing, and have it bear his weight. The boy then asked a question, in his native language. Included within it was a single word that meant, ‘Can I give myself to this and know it will hold me up?’ The translator then knew: He had found his word for ‘faith.’” “Emphasis,” March/April 2006.

Think about this definition for faith for a few seconds, “Can I give myself to this and know it will hold me up?” This is a question we may ask ourselves consciously as well as sub-consciously quite often. It is a good question. We may ask this before we sit in a chair or climb a stepladder. We may ask it in reference to our teachers, jobs, investments, doctors, relationships to other people such as in a marriage or even our church. People or organizations may ask this of us as individuals. We ask this very question of God in Jesus Christ as we trust our future, our very lives to him. “Can I give myself to this God and know he will hold me up?” This is a great definition of faith.

In Genesis, Abram and Sarai, no doubt asked this question of faith more than one time, “Can I give myself to this God and know he will hold me up?” God had come to them seemingly out of nowhere. By grace, God then made a promise of a great new land, asked them to pack up all they had, leave their families, and move some 600 miles by wagon to an unknown land populated by unknown people. They did this trusting their future to God and it went well. It appeared that they could give themselves to this God and trusting he would hold them up.

However, when Abram was 99 and Sarai was 89, this same God told them he was changing their names to Abraham and Sarah, promising them a child and innumerable generations of descendents who would be God’s people. The name change was not unusual, but the shocker was that the 89 year old Sarah was the one who would bear this child. If you were Abraham and Sarah would you trust your future to this God who appears to be promising the impossible to them? The question might be phrased this way: “Can I give myself to this God who will cause an 89 year- old woman to have a child?” The simplest changes can be hard on older people as I have often seen in

ministering to senior citizens. But causing an 89 year-old woman to bear a child appears to be—simply outrageous. What kind of scheme is going on here? “Can I give myself to this God and know he will hold me up?” had to be on their minds.

Oh, but there was more going on here. There is another twist to the story. It is found in the first verse of Genesis 17. “When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, ‘I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless.’” Hear these last words: “walk before me and be blameless.” God was saying two things here, “You can give yourself to me and know I will hold you up.” A-n-d, here is the twist from God. It is found in the word “blameless.” The word blameless used here does not mean to be without sin, but it means God was asking Abraham and Sarah, “Can I, God, give myself to you and know you will hold me up?” “Can I have faith that you will continue to walk with me?” TNIBC Vol. I, pg 458.

Think about this for a few seconds. We often worry about trusting our future to God. We are always putting God on trial in some way or another. God had better be ready to meet our needs, yes, even to suffer doing things our way or we will (foolishly) turn to something or someone else in which to place our faith or our lives. Ever since God created humanity, he has been asking us to be there for him. Not just to Abraham, but to all of us, God commands, “walk before me, and be blameless.” Can God place his faith in us? Can God give himself to us and know we will hold him up?’

This is the same question Jesus raised with his disciples then and of us now, in the passage from Mark. Poor Peter, bless his heart, opened the door on this one. Previous to this passage, Jesus had asked the disciples, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” It was the right thing to say. It was Peter’s way of saying to Jesus, “You are God and I trust my future to you.” Jesus was happy about Peter’s confession of faith. Then Jesus said something that turned everything upside down. “He began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” The disciples knew that Jesus was talking about himself and were stunned. Wouldn’t we be? “Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things.’” Poor Peter, he opened the door for Jesus to challenge him as to whether or not Peter would be supportive of Jesus, the Messiah, to whom Peter entrusted his future.

This confrontation with Jesus “has to be Peter's most distressing life-moment to date. He had just been commended for making the right and good and proper testimony about Jesus and almost within seconds was berated by Jesus as lower than the worst scoundrel alive! What a contrast. Why the change in attitude? It had to do with how paltry Peter's concept of the Messiah of God.” It is a small minded concept too many people have today, as well. “To put it in the Scottish poet, George McDonald's great words: ‘They all were looking for a king, To slay their foes and lift them high; Thou cam'st a little baby thing, That made a woman cry.’ Peter, the other disciples, and we ourselves want a mighty champion to affirm our cause and take to the battlefield on our behalf, to win a victory that destroys our enemy while asserting

our basic goodness.” “Peter's views were on target, but he did not know that the target on which they were focused was his own life and that of all humans with him.” Peter and humanity missed what Jesus was about. In this confrontation with Jesus, Peter went from ecstasy to great distress in seconds! “Emphasis,” March/April 2009.

The problem is that with Peter, we may want to believe and confess to Jesus that “we can give ourselves to you Lord, and we know you will hold us up,” but on our terms, not his. “We do not want our hero, and certainly not us to suffer in any way when we give ourselves to him in faith. We want an easy faith, a soft and comfortable Christianity.” But the truth of the matter is that the only way the sins of self-centeredness could be overcome and eliminated was by Jesus going to the cross. The only way we could be made right with God was by the crucifixion of his Son. “When Peter tried to avert Jesus from such a path, he was mouthing the blasphemies of the devil who had earlier tried to tempt Jesus into taking the easy road that promised personal safety but left the human race condemned.” When we only trust our future to God in Jesus Christ on our own terms, we are playing the part of the devil. Of course, Jesus rebukes such misguided ideas!

“Once Jesus' rebuke of Peter was accomplished, Jesus turned to the crowds (and to us) to make the point:” Faith in God in Jesus Christ is a lifetime journey, “not a destination; the Christian life is a pilgrimage, not a tour. Those who settle too quickly into thinking, “I have been saved and therefore there will be no suffering for me “will find that they have missed the last boat to the kingdom of God. Those who think they can travel the road to the kingdom on air- conditioned coaches that keep them safe from the rigors of daily battle will come to realize too late that their conveyances have run out of gas after circling too long without purpose.” “Jesus had to go to the cross in order to be the Messiah of God. And we, who understand these things during the season of Lent, would do well to travel with him, not to earn our own salvation, but to ensure that we are not denying his very costly grace in our lives.” We cannot avoid the suffering that comes with Jesus giving himself to us and our faithfully being there to hold him up as our Messiah at all times. It is part of the Journey. “Emphasis,” March/April 2009.

Jesus then put it all on the line for us. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?’ Or in other words, Jesus was telling us what God told Abraham, “walk before me and be blameless.” You have got to have my back like I have yours. I want and need you to be just as trustworthy as I am. I need to know I can place my faith in you and can trust you to be there for me, too. In his way Jesus was asking us “Can I give myself to you and know you will hold me up?”

Think of this, again, and let us release our worry about God being there in our future, because he is indeed there just as Abraham and Sarah found. In Jesus, he suffered on the cross and gave his body and blood to prove his word on this. Let us instead consider how much God counts on us being there in his future, not just in words, but in body and blood, too. God depends upon us to be his messengers of the

good news that God is always with us and that our salvation comes by faith in God Jesus Christ. In response to this saving grace, God needs you and me to be the trustworthy parents, Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, children, youth, adults, elders, deacons, members of ministries, Presbyterian Women, Mariners, Prairie Schooners, generous givers of time, talents, money, and nursery care, bakers of cookies, servers of coffee and juice, musicians and pastors who will have Jesus' back. God wants us to hold Jesus and his message up in word and deed, even when going is hard, when economic times are tough, the uncertainty of change surrounds us, illnesses drag us down, when people foolishly spat over bruised egos, and attendance is waning. Do we have to like the difficulties we face—No! Personally, I want nothing to do with such suffering and the temptation to run away from them can be very great on any given day. But where would we run to that would not be running away from our responsibilities that God is counting on us to carry out, that God has promised to help us with, and that would not be letting Jesus down? Suffering is a part of being there for Jesus so that others might come to have faith in him, too. It is in these times that God asks us, "Can I give myself, my whole self, to you and know you will hold me up?" So the question is not can we trust our future to God, but can God trust the future of the church and the gospel to us?

How shall we respond to this? Let us respond as 99 year-old Abraham and 89 year-old Sarah did in faith to the salvation God gave them as a gift, that God gives us as a gift of grace in Jesus Christ. Sarah faithfully bore a son, Isaac, trusting God to be there in their future. Abraham was faithful to God in loving Sarah and raising Isaac. God was in their future making of them many descendents of followers of God that includes you and me, today. As we trust our future to God, let us be the people God can give himself to and can know we will hold him up now and forever, too.