

## “By Faith”

March 8, 2020

First Christian Church

Scripture Text: Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

In Romans, Paul is writing an impossible letter to an impossible audience. In Paul's time there were 2 distinct kinds of Christians: Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Generally speaking, Jewish Christians were faithful Jews who recognized Jesus as the long awaited Jewish Messiah. Jesus' arrival inspired them to not only follow Jesus' teaching, but double down on obedience to the law. After all, following the law is what it meant to be God's people ever since Moses brought the 10 commandments down from Mount Sinai. The other group was made up of Gentile Christians who came to know God through Jesus from a background outside of Judaism. They had no history with the law and felt no obligation to follow it. They just knew Jesus set them free from worshipping the Roman emperor and his religious whims in order to come to the one true God of life. These are two very different groups with hugely different backgrounds and practices who could get into some pretty heated debates. Paul's letter was to be circulated between all of them.

But the challenge is deeper than walking the tightrope between these two groups. Since the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis, God has identified and promised that the descendants of Abraham are and would always be God's chosen people. But thanks to Jesus, there is a new people of God – Christians – who do not necessarily trace their biological ancestry to Abraham. This is a big problem. For if God simply casts aside all the covenants and promises made to Abraham, Moses, David, and through the prophets in favor of these new Christians, what does that say about God? Suddenly God is unreliable and unfaithful. It looks like God is leaving His old bride to claim a new, younger one. And if God is being unfaithful to God's promises to the children of Abraham, why should anyone trust that God will be faithful in the future with the new followers of Jesus? Paul has taken it upon himself to straighten this out.

So in order to address a single letter to the old bride and the new flame, Paul goes to the very beginning of the Jewish faith. Before the prophets, before King David, before the promised land, before Moses, the 10 commandments and the law; there was Abraham. You remember from your Lenten readings this past week that God tried to start creation over again with Noah and his family after the flood, but the flood did not get rid of Adam's sinful tendency to act selfishly as oppose to obediently. One of Noah's sons picked up right where the old creation left off. God's next plan to bring people home again included selecting one family and starting a relationship with them in which they would obey God and God would bless them in every way so they might be an example and a blessing to the world. God chose Abraham and Sarah, a couple who longed for a child but were unable to have any. As you know, God basically came to Abraham and Sarah and offered them a deal or a covenant. God said if you follow me, go where I say to go, do what I say to do, then I will not only make you wealthy and powerful, but I will give you a family – descendants to carry on after you. Sarah and Abraham agreed and left their home to follow God to what would become the Promised Land. Along the way, God blessed

them with livestock and servants. God kept them safe from the consequence of their bad decisions. God blessed them in battle. Abraham and Sarah were growing in wealth and influence every day, but there was no sign of a child, and they were getting pretty old – past the child bearing years. It was then in Genesis 15 that God came to them again and renewed the promise of wealth, power and descendants. Abraham pushed God about the descendants part of the deal, reminding God how old they were, and God reaffirmed that even though it seemed impossible, God was going to make it happen. It is at that point, in verse 6, when Abraham believed God could and would do the impossible that “the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.” Before there was a physical mark that defined the family of Abraham, before Moses and the law, before there were signs of obedience, before there was any objective, concrete way of showing you were part of God’s people; there was belief. Abraham believed God could and would do what He promised. Even though there was no possible way Sarah was going to have a baby for she was beyond the child bearing years, even though God had made the same promise years ago and had not made a single move toward fulfilling it; Abraham still believed God could and would do what God promised and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. He was made right with God because he believed God.

Romans 4 tells us that is how these new Gentile Christians and the old Jewish Christians are brought into the same family of God. They have the same start. They, like Abraham, believed God could do and would do what God promised no matter how impossible it seems. That is where it all started. Yes, there is a long journey after that, but this is where it starts. This is where it has always started. Did Abraham and Sarah always get it right when trying to follow God? No. They took matters into their own hands to try and make God’s promise happen on their own terms several times including prostituting Sarah and having a child by another woman. Did the early Christians always get it right when trying to follow Jesus? No. They wandered off after different leaders and lost the core of Jesus’ teachings in order to fight about trivial details. Do we always get it right when trying to follow Jesus? No. We still look at behaviors and struggle with who is in the faith and who is out of the faith as we draw our own lines of what it means to be faithful. But Romans 4 reminds us that at the very core, it is about believing God can do and will do what God promised He would do regardless of how impossible it seems. For Abraham and Sarah, it was whether God could bring life from a barren womb. For Moses’ time it was whether God could bring life and freedom to an enslaved people. For Paul’s time and ours, can God bring life after death. Can God bring resurrection and new life after our heart stops beating and our brain flat lines. Not a single one of those things was possible, yet God was good to God’s word and they all happened. And all along the way, the ones who were found to be righteous, were the ones who believed. Even for those that didn’t get to see the promises fulfilled in their lifetime, “the LORD reckoned it to them as righteousness,” and the righteous will be saved.

It is right there in the most famous verse from the Bible. Say it with me, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” (John 3: 16) New life begins with belief – “whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.” It begins there, but it does not end there. Abraham and Sarah learned to believe and depend on God’s promise even more than the evidence in front of their

faces. Their son Isaac was the fulfilment of God's promise to them of a family and descendants, but Abraham was willing to sacrifice him on God's command because if Isaac didn't work out, God would find another way. Abraham believed God would keep His word. Moses learned patience as God worked through 10 plagues in order to not just set God's people free, but set them free with the riches of Egypt. Paul originally put his trust in earning his way to God through obedience to the law, but after a face to face encounter with the risen Jesus, he realized it was blind faith that made him worthy of life in God's name. For us, we believe Jesus makes up for the difference between where we are and where we need to be. We talked about that last week. Our church word for that is grace and it is a gift to those that believe.

But let me remind you of something Steve and Kathy Politz shared with us just before Christmas. There is a difference between believing in God and believing God. The Scriptures tell us demons and evil spirits believe in God. They affirm there is a God, yet actively fight against God. Believing in God is irrelevant. The question is do you believe God? Do you believe God can and will do what God promises? Do you believe the impossible promises of God? Do you believe God can and will fulfill those impossible promises? Do you believe Jesus rose from the dead? Do you believe in life after death? Do you believe Jesus' sacrifice was powerful enough to overcome your sin? Not our sin, but your sin and your shortcomings and your disappointments? Do you believe that the God who brought a baby to Abraham and Sarah in their old age, the God who brought freedom to the slaves of Egypt, and the God who raised Jesus from the grave; can forgive you now and empower you to new life on earth and raise you to eternal life in heaven? Do you believe that "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life"? If your answer is yes, then you have been cleansed, justified, forgiven, made new and have begun your journey to that new life. You are part of God's family.

It matters what we believe. Researchers tell us people don't collect information from the outside world to form new beliefs. They gather new information that supports their already existing beliefs." Let me repeat that: researchers tell us people don't collect information from the outside world to form new beliefs. They gather new information that supports their already existing beliefs." You already know this is true. It is why we remember every positive thing the news has to say about our own political party, but cannot remember a single positive thing about the opposing party. We are not taking in information to form a belief of which Political perspective is best. We gather information to support what we already believe. Our beliefs serve as the filters by which we see and interpret the world. Let that belief be centered on God and you will see God in your midst. You will see miracles. You will see kindness. You will see love. Let that belief system be set by the world, and you will see nothing but cause and effect relationships based on selfish/fleshly motivation.

What you believe matters. Believe in the God of life through His Son Jesus and know that God does not create, make promises to and abandon a people. God binds Himself in the promises God makes. God has bound Himself to you for now and for always. If you can just believe.

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