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March 8, 2020  
Hope CRC

**Failure, Faithfulness, and Father Abraham**  
Romans 4:1-5, 16-25

What a week.

The Democratic Party is down to just two candidates (well, three if you count Tulsi Gabbard...)

We've enjoyed some early spring weather – and while it's certainly been beautiful, I found myself wondering if it's maybe a little too much, too soon? Maybe I'm not the only one whose enjoyment has been tempered by concerns about climate change, and how that in turn affects our local ecosystems.

And our weather systems. Like the one that caused Tuesday's tornado in Nashville.

Meanwhile, the coronavirus continues to spread, including new confirmed cases in Illinois – and with a potential pandemic that close to home, it's hard to strike just the right balance between caution and fear, preparedness and preoccupation. We don't know what to expect. We don't know how to respond.

Some of you, in your jobs, have been scrambling to turn those "what if" scenarios into contingency plans. You know. Just in case.

Some of you, just in case, have chosen to stay home today, and are maybe listening to this message midweek via podcast. We are mindful of you, we are praying for peace and health, and we are singing today of the God who is our help.

Of course, there are plenty of other illnesses and injuries we have sustained this week, and plenty of other headlines and happenings we could mention – including happenings all around the world that should be headlines but don't make it to primetime news.

What a week.

Now I'm not trying to whip up anxiety where it's not there. It is a beautiful day, and we're sitting here in this beautiful space surrounded by smiles and sunshine. But I imagine that, for many of us, anxiety isn't too far beneath the surface these days. Just simmering there. Maybe you know and feel it too.

Last Sunday, we considered Romans 5 and the full extent of the fall. If Adam, the prototype for humanity, became inextricably bound in sin and death, then so are all of us.

The image of the swirling cauldron, the whirlpool.

And we are swept up in it, trapped in it, up to our necks in it...

It's not just my sins and your sins. Something has gone wrong. Horribly, irreparably wrong. Creation is broken. It's not the way it's supposed to be.

We feel this, down in our bones and deep in our souls.

We are in need of a whole new world order. A new creation.

This is the gift that Lent gives us every year: Permission, and space, to say that we need saving.

Which brings us to our text this morning: Romans 4.

It is easy to read this chapter and conclude that to be saved, well, you just “Gotta have faith” (to borrow the phrase from George Michael...).

More of it. More clarity. More conviction. Be more like Abraham.

But doesn't that sound a lot like works? And earning something? And isn't Paul's whole point here to undermine that idea?

What's going on?

It helps to put Romans 4 in some context.

Because this little sound bite is part of a whole cohesive argument delivered by the Apostle Paul, via letter, to the Church in Rome. A multiethnic church, made up of Jews and Gentiles. It's messy. They're misunderstanding and misrepresenting each other and the gospel and Paul writes to set them straight.

And Paul writes, unapologetically, as a Jew (v1). And not just a casual cultural Jew but a serious Torah-toting and -quoting Jew. Paul (like Jesus) is a person who is steeped in Old Testament. This is his story. All his life, he has lived, breathed, memorized, memorialized, the words and stories of the Hebrew scriptures.

And so the God that Paul knows is the God of those scriptures.

The Maker of heaven and earth.

God of creation.

God the righteous, God the just.

God of all that is ordered and good and true.

And God of covenant.

God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The God of Israel.

The God of Israel. By the time we get to the first century, this has almost become a liability.

Because, while the scriptures echo and resound with the promises of God to restore all that is broken and bring justice to all that is wrong, so many of those promises are tied to God's covenant... with Israel.

The same Israel who time and time again fails to uphold their end of the bargain.

God is faithful. Israel? Failure.

God is faithful. Israel? Failure. Failure. Failure.

Spiraling and swirling with no end in sight.

That's pretty much the story of the Old Testament.

Good news: God has a plan to restore and redeem!

Bad news: God's plan hinges somehow on his covenant with Israel.

And it left the Judaism of the first century—Paul's Judaism—with profound angst and questions of “what next?” How does this story end? How does God come through on the promises he made, *and* keep his covenant, *and* still act in righteousness *and* execute justice on evil, *when* evil is so entrenched in the very people God has made those promises to and through??

The short answer is Jesus. (But, in Romans 4, we don't get there until verse 24.)

The longer answer is a challenge to the church in Rome, and I think, a comfort to the church today.

For the Jews in Paul's day, one common answer to the conundrum of their unfinished story with God, was to double down on Torah.

“Never mind the generations before us. We'll get it right. We'll make law-keeping our main thing. We'll even make extra laws around the law to help us. We'll be holy. We'll keep the covenant. We'll be the True and faithful Israel. And this is how we'll get to the new creation.”

Before he met Jesus on the road to Damascus, this was Paul's passion. It was the best answer he knew.

But *now*, now that Paul saw the scriptures and the unfinished story in the light of Jesus and the cross and the resurrection, a new passion emerged. If the question of first century Judaism is *what next*, Paul's emphatic answer is: the church! A new family of Abraham comprised of Jews *and* Gentiles. Not defined by law, but by grace, through Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. This is where history has been pointing all along.

This is the argument of the book of Romans. Paul is making his case point by point. And here, in Romans 4, for the Jew that is still unconvinced, Paul goes back to the beginning of the people of Israel. To Abraham.

The first half of the chapter basically makes the point that Abraham was credited righteousness not by virtue of his works, or his circumcision (because he wasn't even circumcised yet), or his Torah observance (the law hadn't even been given yet). It was because he believed God.

The second half of the chapter sets up this idea of belief, or faith, as the DNA of Abraham's new multiethnic family—the church. This, says Paul, was the plan all along, even all the way back in Genesis.

After graduating from college, I moved to the near northwest side of Chicago to work at a predominantly Latino church (straight up Cicero for an hour). It was a total cross-cultural immersion experience for me. I made a ton of mistakes and learned a lot. “You're like a *missionary*,” someone on my worship team once told me.

My job was music. But after a couple years, one of the pastors pulled me in to help teach a weeknight exegetical Bible study. “Dig deeper” we called it, or something like that. We decided to start with Genesis.

So there we were on Wednesday nights: about twelve of us, with different ages and ethnicities and incomes, pastor's kids and people new to faith, blue collar workers and graduate students and people for whom English was a second language. We all sat around a big board table and opened our Bibles to page 1.

“In the beginning.”

And as we worked our way through those pages, I remember learning and loving the joy of teaching.

I remember their enthusiasm, which stirred up mine, and the Spirit that met us all there.

And I remember reading the book of Genesis, with this little basement gathering of saints, and watching for the “seed,” the “offspring,” the one promised in Genesis 3 who would come from Eve and crush the serpent’s head.

*Who is it?* The whole book of Genesis keeps asking this question, keeps drawing our attention to lineage and offspring, keeps connecting seed and promise, keeps us hoping for someone who will come and restore what was lost.

*But who is it?*

The short answer is Jesus.

The longer answer includes the church—all who have the faith of Abraham.

Romans 4:16 is steeped in Genesis language, lineage language. If you look there, you see promise, offspring (literally, seed), and Abraham as the father of many nations.

But there’s another word there that gets lost in our translation.

Our NIV says, “The promise comes by faith.” But in the Greek, it’s not “by faith,” per se. It’s *ek pisteos*, “out of” faith. Originating from.

Like children come out of their mother’s womb or their father’s seed. *Ek*. Out of.

It’s the same word used in Genesis 15, when God promises Abraham a son that will come “out of” him, and “out of” his wife Sarah.

“Faith” shows up twice in verse 16, and both times it’s preceded by *ek*. Paul is piling on the kinship language here to give both Jews and Gentiles a shared lineage in the line of Father Abraham.

“Father Abraham had many sons; many sons had Father Abraham...”

So what does it mean for us to be “out of” the line of faith?

Well, it depends what you mean by faith. We usually think of faith as belief or intellectual ascent. Something abstract. Something in the mind. Something we say or think or maybe even feel.

We who stand in the Protestant tradition have inherited, from Martin Luther and others, an insistence that it is faith, not works, that puts us in right standing with God.

And the Reformers would be quick to point out that that faith is faith *in Christ*, so that the merits are all his, not ours.

Which is all right and good. But there is still something about faith, understood this way, that stubbornly rests with us. “Justification by faith.” Faith that’s yours to muster and think your way into. And faith like that sounds, to me, an awful lot like a kind of intellectual “work.”

But what if faith is more embodied than that? Like trusting, like doing the faithful thing, the thing that is in accordance with belief, even if the intellectual ascent is shaky at best.

Like, like *faithfulness*?

Because that's another way to read and translate these texts.

“The promise comes out of faithfulness, so that it's by grace – not just for those out of the law but also those who are out of the faithfulness of Abraham.” (Romans 4:16)

Again, that would sound like work, except that Paul is talking about lineage.

The family of faithfulness—

starting with Abraham saying yes to God, yes to a son in his old age, yes to the absurdity and impossibility of it, yes to the promise, yes to the one “who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.”

The family of faithfulness—

in contrast with unfaithful Israel.

The family of faithfulness—

made up of Jews and Gentiles.

The family of faithfulness—

stretching from Abraham through history and welcoming into the fold all who say yes to God, all who say—and here, with Paul, we come finally to Jesus—yes to the cross, yes to the resurrection, yes to the absurdity and impossibility of it, yes to the lordship of Jesus, yes to the power of God, yes to the promise that life wins over death and good wins over evil and the plan to restore all things is still moving forward.

People of God, this is who you are. This is where you come from. This is the tribe to whom you belong.

The family of faithfulness, gathered around Jesus—

Jesus, who is the faithful Israel,

Jesus, who meets our failures with his grace,

Jesus, whose faithfulness, even unto death on the cross, has fulfilled all righteousness.

Jesus, who will come again to bring justice and shalom.

So, whatever this week brings, whatever this year brings, let us walk together in faithfulness.

Saying yes to hope over despair, courage over fear, promise over impossibility, life over death.

Saying yes, not just in our minds, but with body and spirit and action and love for God and neighbor as we bear witness to the one “who has the power to do what he has promised.”

To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus for all generations. Amen.