

<sup>1</sup>What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? <sup>2</sup>For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. <sup>3</sup>For what does the scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” <sup>4</sup>Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. <sup>5</sup>But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness...

<sup>13</sup>For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. <sup>14</sup>If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. <sup>15</sup>For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

<sup>16</sup>For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, <sup>17</sup>as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”)—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. <sup>18</sup>Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become “the father of many nations,” according to what was said, “So numerous shall your descendants be.” <sup>19</sup>He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. <sup>20</sup>No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, <sup>21</sup>being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. <sup>22</sup>Therefore his faith “was reckoned to him as righteousness.” <sup>23</sup>Now the words, “it was reckoned to him,” were written not for his sake alone, <sup>24</sup>but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, <sup>25</sup>who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

Abraham is featured in the readings from both Genesis (12:1-9) and Romans this morning, so let’s take a few moments to review who he was and why he is such an important figure in the Bible.

Depending on what reference book you check, Abraham lived as early as 2100 B.C. or as late as 1800 B.C. I like to just use the round number of 2000 B.C., which means Abraham lived as long before Jesus as we live after Jesus. There was no such thing as a Hebrew people at this time, and there was no written Hebrew language. There was no city of Jerusalem and there was no Jewish religion. All of those things later came to be because of Abraham.

Abraham is the beginning point of the story of God’s chosen people. Genesis tells us he was born in Ur, in present day Iraq, and originally had the shorter name, Abram. He later moved with his father up the Tigris-Euphrates river valleys to Haran. There he had a divine revelation from a God he had to this point neither known or worshiped; a God named YAHWEH, the LORD.

The story begins very simply, “Now YAHWEH said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.’” After promising three things – a land, a people, and a blessing – the Biblical writer describes Abram’s response with a minimum of words: “So Abram went, as YAHWEH had told him.”

There are many details that are left out of the story, but two particularly stand out for me. First, I would love to know Sarah’s response when her husband tells her that they are moving again. “Why are we moving?”

“Well, dear, YAHWEH told me that we should move.”

“YAHWEH? Who’s YAHWEH?”

“Well, I’m not exactly sure, but I got the impression that he’s really important. I’ve never had a god speak to me before, but I think that’s what he might be because he was very convincing! He says that there’s this great piece of property for us a little south of here, plus – you’ll really like this part – we’re going to have a family; a really big family. You always said you wanted to have kids.”

“That was fifty years ago when we got married. I gave up on that dream a long time ago. You’re nuts if you think I’m going to go with you to follow some god I’ve never heard of before.”

The writer doesn’t give us any inkling of what Sarah’s response was, but I bet you that it was something like that. The second omitted detail that I’m really curious about is, why Abram? What was it about Abram that caused YAHWEH to choose him? Did Abram have just the right combination of genes that YAHWEH had been looking for? Was he more open to receiving a divine revelation than others?

Since Abram became the first of God’s chosen people, a people that includes Jacob, Moses, King David, and ultimately, Jesus, we might expect that at the very least he was a man with exceptionally high moral standards. But that doesn’t appear to be the case. The very next story in chapter 12 depicts Abram lying to save his own skin.

When he and Sarah went to Egypt because of a famine, he feared that because Sarah was so beautiful, someone would kill him so that he could take her for his wife. Sarah must have been an exceptional woman to be turning heads when she was in her sixties, but that's the way the story goes. Anyhow, Abram convinces Sarah to pose as his sister rather than his wife and ends up allowing her to be taken into Pharaoh's harem, sacrificing her honor to save his own skin.

A few chapters later, when Abram and Sarah continue to be childless despite YAHWEH's promise, they decide that YAHWEH needs some help, so Abram has a son by Sarah's maid, Hagar. But YAHWEH is faithful to his promise and Sarah gives birth to Isaac. A short time later, spurred by Sarah's jealousy, Abram abandons Hagar and her son, Ishmael – hardly a good example of responsible fatherhood. Abram may have been above average when it came to moral standards, but he was no shining example and the Bible never claims that for him.

When it comes right down to it, we don't know why YAHWEH chose Abram rather than someone else. The writer doesn't tell us. It's not an important detail to the story. The only thing that is important according to the story is that YAHWEH told Abram "go", and Abram went. YAHWEH took the initiative, made a promise to a man who had no particular credentials to commend him for being chosen, and Abram responded in faith and trusted YAHWEH to keep the promise.

This is the reason that Paul lifts up the example of Abraham to explain the essence of the gospel to the Christians at Rome. The essence of the gospel is that our relationship with God does not begin with us and what we do. Our relationship with God, our righteousness, begins with God's promise of a new relationship. That promise becomes our reality when we accept it in faith that God can be trusted to keep his promise.

What makes the gospel such good news is that our prior condition is of no consequence. Paul used the first three chapters of Romans to make the case that all people are sinners – we are not righteous, we are not faithful to the covenant God made with us, we are not in a positive relationship with God. This was true of Abraham when God chose him and called him to a new land, to be father of a new people, a people through whom God would bless all nations of the earth. Abraham was not righteous.

In our gospel reading (Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26), Jesus comes in contact with three people who are not righteous by the standards of the Law. First is Matthew, a tax collector. Tax collectors do an important job, but it's never been a job which makes them popular with those of us who pay taxes. But being a tax collector in Jesus' day was particularly onerous. Tax collectors worked on behalf of the Roman government, a foreign occupation force. They were despised as being collaborators and shunned from the community. Matthew was not in a positive relationship with God or the community. He was not righteous.

A woman approaches Jesus who has been hemorrhaging for twelve years. Just on this basis she would receive our sympathy, but there is something else involved here. According to Jewish law, bleeding even in small amounts rendered one to be ritually unclean, which meant the person was not allowed to take part in the worship life of the community. Others were not able to touch her because they would themselves become unclean by doing so. Because of her bleeding, this woman was not in a positive relationship with God or the community. She was not righteous.

The third person Jesus comes in contact with is the daughter of the leader of the synagogue. She is dead. Whereas Matthew and the bleeding woman were figuratively dead, this girl is literally dead. When one is dead, one is not in a positive relationship with God or the community. The dead girl was not righteous.

Jesus takes the initiative with these three "unrighteous" people and makes them righteous. He puts them in a positive relationship with himself by welcoming, healing, and restoring. He welcomes Matthew, he heals the bleeding woman, and he restores the dead girl. Just like Abraham, their prior condition was of no consequence – it didn't matter. Jesus is able to make them righteous.

Those of us here this morning come before almighty God with all sorts of prior conditions. We bear secret hurts and pains that no one else knows about. We shoulder guilt or regrets, not knowing how to get rid of them. We have become estranged from friends and family, we have ignored the needs of our neighbor, we have thoughtlessly misused or abused God's creation. None of those prior conditions are able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus, because in Jesus God has restored the positive relationship with us that was his intention since the creation of the world. The good news is that God is righteous, God is faithful to God's promises, and Paul proclaims that in Jesus' death and resurrection, God has "made us righteous". Our response is to be the same as that of Abraham 4,000 years ago – we simply trust God to keep his promises. That, says Paul, is the gospel truth.