

Sermon by Rev. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
11th Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 17th, 2001

“Trusting the Promise”

Genesis 18: 1-15; Romans 4:16-25

There was once a tourist who came too close to the edge of the Grand Canyon.

He lost his footing and slipped over the side,
clawing and scratching to save himself.

After he went out of sight and just before he fell into space,
he grabbed hold of a scrubby bush with both hands
and held on for dear life.

Desperate for help, he called out toward the sky, “Is there anyone up there?”

A calm and powerful voice came out of the sky, “Yes, there is.”

The man pleaded, “Can you help me? Can you please help me?”

The calm voice replied, “Yes, probably I can. What is your problem?”

“I fell over the cliff and am dangling in space,
holding a bush that’s about to break. Please help me.”

The voice from above said, “I’ll try. Do you believe?”

“Yes, Yes! I believe”

“Do you have faith?”

“Yes, Yes! I have strong faith!”

“Well, in that case,” said the voice,

“Simply let loose of the bush and everything will turn out fine.”

There was a tense pause...then the tourist looked again to the heavens
and cried out, “Is there anyone *else* up there?”

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Trust can be a fearful thing to learn.

And learning to trust God can be the most fearful thing of all,
because trusting the God of the Bible can sometimes lead us to do things
that seem foolish.

The story of Abraham is a story of a man putting his trust in God.

And it is a story of God calling a man to do a frightening thing:

God said to Abraham: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s
house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation and I will bless
you.”

When God spoke these words to Abraham,

we might have expected a tense pause,
with Abraham finally looking back up toward heaven and asking,
“Is there anyone *else* up there?”

But Abraham did not question God, but went as the Lord directed him.
He may have been afraid, but he felt the fear and went on –
he trusted God's promise.

And in Genesis 18, which we have read today,
Abraham is called upon again to trust God.
This time, many years have passed since God made the promise to Abraham,
since Abraham left home to follow that promise.
Many years and still there is no son to fulfill that promise.
Just Abraham and his wife, Sarah, and a few servants.

Then one day three strangers appear at a Abraham's door.
And after Abraham, following the custom of his day, serves them a meal,
one of the strangers says to him:

“I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah
will have a son.”

Well, Sarah has heard this line before; now she knows better than to trust it.
Sarah hides behind the tent and laughs.
Sarah is no dreamer. She has both feet on the ground. She knows the facts:
Her husband is nearly a hundred years old,
and to bear a child at Sarah's age might just finish her off,
even if it were physically possible.
So she laughs. “Come on, Abraham.
You're not going to fall for this again are you?
Don't be foolish!”

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Wouldn't you laugh? We've heard all these promises before –
Just so much religious talk and wishful thinking.
What can faith really do when confronted with the hard facts of life,
the human possibilities and impossibilities?
Why not be like Sarah,
skeptical of a promise that sounds too good to be true.
We ask the same questions, born of hard experience:
What could possibly be done to save this broken marriage?
What could possibly be done to heal this body, wasting away?
What could possibly be done pull this teenager out of a downward spiral
into addiction?
What could possibly be done to save a culture hell-bent on destroying itself?

We've learned not to trust promises anymore.
We are given so much practice at distrust these days...
We started out by trusting our fathers and mothers,
for some of us that turned out well
but for others, it was the first taste of betrayal.

We've tried trusting our leaders,
 who sometimes rise to the occasion and accomplish great things,
 but who sometimes turn out to be scoundrels and villains.
We want to trust in democracy,
 but we make a mess of it, and the good of society gets
 bogged down in greed and self-interest.
We trust in our health, until the day we hear the test results,
 and they're really bad.
Then we try trusting our doctors, who sometimes work miracles,
 but other times can't make anything work.

It is no wonder we laugh with Sarah.
The pain of broken promises is too real for us.
We've let go of the bush before, and no one was there to catch us.

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But it is into this world of broken promises that the God of Abraham
comes to dinner in a traveler's guise,
comes to dinner with a barren couple who are far from home,
and says
 "You shall have a son...
 >Your descendants shall be a great nation...
It is into this world of broken promises that
God comes to the family that has fallen apart, and says
 >Your will be made whole ...
God comes to the man hooked up to all sorts of medical machines, and says,
 >Your will see your home again ...
God comes to the woman stricken with shame, and says
 >Your past will no longer haunt you...
God comes to the lost soul, and says
 >I have a purpose for your life, and I will fulfill it...
God comes to a mother and father, and says
 >Your child is my child, he belongs to me forever...
God comes to the church, and says
 >You are the body of Christ,
 and you will live by the power of the Spirit...
God comes to the dying, and says
 "Today you will be with me in Paradise."

Into this world of broken promises, the God of Abraham comes,
making promises, and calling the people of God
to trust the promises.

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But why should we?
Why should we trust that these promises God makes are any good?

It is a fair question, given the pain and suffering we see all around us.

The Apostle Paul must have known we'd ask.
Because he takes a good long look at Abraham's faith.
He looks at Abraham and says, This! This is what it means to have faith!
And anyone who has faith like this, says Paul, anyone who trusts God like this,
is a spiritual descendant of Abraham,
and Abraham is their spiritual father.

But then Paul doesn't linger too long over Abraham.
He moves past Abraham to the object of Abraham's faith,
and takes a good long look at Abraham's God
He says we all live in the presence of Abraham's God
the God who gives life to the dead
and calls into existence the things that do not exist.
Abraham's trust did not begin with himself or his own inner strength.
Our trust does not begin with ourselves;
not with our ability to muster up the energy and the will
to be a great religious person like Abraham.
Our trust is possible because of the presence in our lives of
the God who gives life to the dead
and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

This God's love is poured out upon our lives
(like the water from the baptismal font)
long before we can even begin to comprehend it
and call our faith into existence.

And it is this God who encounters us
in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth....

This is how we know the promise of God is true.
The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.
If anyone ever asks you why you believe in God,
there is really only one Christian answer to that question:
The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus –
the decisive occasion of God's trustworthiness for all time.

That is why we come here on Sunday mornings.
That is why we baptize babies.
That is why we call and ordain and install ministers.
That is why we send people on mission trips.

Because by being swept away by this story
of the life which defines true life,
and the suffering and death which redeems our suffering,
and the glorious resurrection of Jesus which makes new life possible
for the world.

It is by being swept away by this story

that we can come to know the God of the Bible
the God of Abraham
the God we can trust with our lives.

Paul says that as we come to believe in Jesus Christ
and the One who raised Jesus from the dead,
then we will be reckoned to be
as righteous as faithful, old
Father Abraham
who was fully convinced that God is able to do what God has promised.

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Now when Sarah is confronted with Abraham's unshakable faith,
she stops laughing in derision and starts to back-pedal.
And we know (because we know the rest of the story)
that one day Sarah will laugh with delight
as she names her newborn son, Isaac, which means laughter.

If you have been laughing at the possibility of trust,
because of the circumstances of your life;
If you have been skeptical of the promises God has made to you,
because of the situation you face;
Then witness the faith of Abraham,
and witness the faith of the others
who stand as his spiritual descendants.
Witness the faith of those who believe in the One
who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.
Witness their faith,
and trust that the promise of God
is true for you.

Amen.