

THE SACRED JOURNEY – STEPS TO FAITH
Genesis 22:1-19
January 10, 2010

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Today we begin a sacred journey that initially will be four weeks of traveling together. The journey is a wonderful image for faith communities because it means a people on the move, sojourning together, not always sure where we are headed but knowing that we are accompanied along each turn in the pilgrimage. So I invite you to sojourn with us.

If someone were to come along and offer you, all in one glittering package, the indispensable key to good health and a well-adjusted personality, plus the confidence in yourself and in the American way of life to assure success for you and a secure future, and in addition to all that the answer to the riddle of life of why we are here and what is to become of us - that would prove to be quite a package, wouldn't it? Well, that is exactly what some people seem to think that religion has to offer to you when it speaks of faith.

According to this popular notion faith is something you have or which you get which puts you in control of almost every eventuality that life can throw at you. Sometimes it seems to be like a person who has an influential position in government or business - he or she can use their influence where it counts; so, a person of faith apparently has influence where obviously it counts most - with God. Presumably faith can influence God to cure disease, change the weather, overcome insuperable obstacles in your business and private life, and then take care of you after you die.

Moreover, this does not exhaust the possibilities of this popular view of faith for it also seems to be like a secret formula which can unlock doors of opportunity and of mystery which otherwise would be closed. If, for example, you have faith that a venture will succeed it will, like the Wright brothers had. And some people today will testify that it was their faith which made a hazardous business venture succeed.

But this popular view of faith also can unlock even bigger doors. For if you have faith you have the secret formula which unlocks the baffling mysteries of the Bible - how Jesus can be divine and human at the same time or how God can be three persons in one. Faith, you see, apparently holds the answer to the riddle of life and of God, of why we are here and what is to become of us.

Now in all of this you'll note that faith is supposed to be something which we have which puts us in control of the situation. So if things don't turn out quite the way we think they should, then, it is explained, we don't have faith enough, or that we don't have the right kind of faith. For did not Jesus say, "All things are possible to one who believes"; did he not say to the woman praying for her sick child, "O woman, great is your faith, be it to you even as you desire"; and didn't he say to a blind beggar, "Receive your sight, your faith has made you well?" So on the bare face of it it certainly sounds as if faith were something a person has or gets which puts that person in control of forces and powers not available to those who do not have it.

Perhaps so - but maybe we ought to take a closer look, for in each you'll notice Jesus spoke of

the faith of these people not before but after they had already acted and given evidence of their trust in him. He wasn't saying, "Look, if you want your child cured you will have to have faith and then you will get what you want." Rather he was saying, "In your actions in response to me you have already shown such amazing confidence in me and in God that your prayers shall surely be answered." There's an instructive difference here which may not appear very sharp at the moment, but which if understood would give us a far clearer understanding of just what the Bible means by faith. That is why I want to turn now to the ancient story of Abraham and Isaac - one of the great stories of faith in scripture, because it accents the sharp difference between this popular view of faith as something we have which puts us in control of the situation and the Biblical meaning of faith.

When we come back to this old story of Abraham's sacrifice of his son, Isaac, we have to understand, first of all, that although the very thought of child sacrifice is utterly revolting to us today, this story was told in the time when child sacrifice was thought to be the ultimate that a person could offer to their God. Abraham came to learn that this was not so, but not until after he had shown his willingness to go through with it. As it stands the story is the dramatic spelling out of what the Bible means by faith. So in the first place and the first step, it's clear that faith is a venture in obedient action. Abraham's faith is not something he believed about God; it was a willingness to act in accordance with what he understood God's will for him to be. For Abraham it was obedient action, a daring venture which would lead to the very opposite of what Abraham wanted to happen - the death of his child. Faith as the Bible understands it is a venture in obedient action.

Consequently, faith is not primarily the acceptance of a lot of doctrines or truths which are hard to believe - that God is three persons in one, for example, or that Christ rose from the dead. Faith is not static, a something which we have which enables us to accept certain doctrines or Biblical stories as true. Faith is obedient action in offering love and understanding to people who are unlovely and unlovable; in resisting the temptation to look down our noses at people of other races; a willingness to do what we know God would have us do. A man, for example, who says that he believes with all his heart that Jesus is the Son of God or that the Bible is the Word of God, and yet clings to his prejudices, actually has less faith than the man who is beset by all sorts of questions about the divinity of Christ or the doctrine of the Trinity, but who gives himself in forgiving love to those who mistreat him or take advantage of him. Faith is a venture in obedient action. That's the first step.

And this is the second. The reason why Abraham acted in obedience was because he trusted a person - the God who had given evidence of great love and had promised that Abraham would be the father of a nation which would be a blessing to all the world.

You will notice that this is quite different from faith in a book, even when the book is the Bible. If we have faith as Christians it is not as the old hymns put it solely because the Bible tells us so. That transfers my faith in God to faith in a book. To be sure it is faith in the God who is revealed to me through what people have declared about God in the pages of the book - but my faith is in God, not in the book. If a husband trusts his wife, it is not because of the wedding certificate. He trusts her because of what she has been and what she is in her relationship to him. Like marriage, the biblical understanding of faith is a venture in courageous action which grows

out of trust in a person and that's the second step.

And now third - Abraham becomes crystal clear only in a very definite and specific situation involving choice and decision. Abraham didn't have faith in God in general. We know this faith only because of specific incidents where he made a decision because he was willing to sacrifice his only son Isaac at that specific time and place.

And this is the precise nature of Christian faith, too. Your children, for example, like most children, profess faith and love for you in general, but the only possible way of knowing whether they do trust you is in the decision they make at a specific moment in a concrete situation. I recall, for example, the time my mother was teaching me to swim and she was urging me to jump off a lakeside dock into the water where she stood ready to see that I would not drown. No doubt I loved and trusted her in general, but I did not have faith in her, for that situation, which was the only situation which mattered at that moment. Until after much fussing and fuming, I screwed up my courage and actually jumped, putting myself completely into her hands despite my fears and misgivings. When I jumped, at that moment, I had faith in her - not before.

So it is with us. Faith in God in general means nothing unless there is a willingness to act in a specific situation. Very often, of course, what God's wills for us in a specific situation may not be nearly so clear cut. For Abraham the decision was to obey an utterly absurd command. Isaac was the child God had promised to Abraham in his old age. Moreover, Isaac was not simply an only child born of old age - Isaac was the child in whom all of God's promises for the future of all nations of the earth lay. Yet, Isaac, the child of promise was to be sacrificed. It was absurd.

So too with our Lord's struggle in the garden on the night before he died. Death, in that situation, made no sense. It was the defeat of all that Jesus had lived and worked for. How could his death possibly advance of the Kingdom of God? Fortunately, you and I are not called upon to make decisions that seem quite so absurd. Although when a woman watches her husband slowly dying from cancer, to trust in a God whose only purpose is love may seem equally absurd. More frequently I suppose it is a question of knowing just what God's will may be before us in a specific situation. And I share that struggle to know God's will with each of you.

But there is a final characteristic of Biblical faith. It is a venture in obedient action in a specific situation growing out of trust in a person but it is more. And the final step is that it is a venture in the expectation that God will act. Abraham acted trusting that God would act, yet not knowing how God would act. Jesus acted on the night before he died knowing that God would act yet not knowing how God would act. In Abraham's case God provided another answer for the sacrifice; in the case of Jesus, God didn't. God didn't provide a lamb as a substitute for Christ's sacrificial death.

And so it is with us. We cannot possibly foresee how God will act in a specific situation. No more than Abraham, can we know for sure, in advance, whether that which we understand to be God's will will actually turn out to be God's will. We act in faith, trusting that we are doing what we call - the right thing - but never sure it will turn out to be the right thing in the end. We are trusting God to act in whatever way God will - in forgiveness, perhaps, or in blessing or in whatever way God may see fit.

One of the most serious distortions of the meaning of Biblical faith comes at this point. You and I may recognize that faith means trusting God to act, but too often we think this means that God will act the way we want God to act. So if a person prays, who has faith, that person believes that the prayer will be answered just in the way they want it answered. But that makes of faith that glittering package by which we get God under our control. This is a popular but completely unbiblical notion of what faith is. To be sure faith expects God to act - Jesus urges us to pray - to seek - to knock and promises God will act in response. But faith always stops short of saying how God will act. Like jumping off the dock, faith is putting ourselves, despite our fears and misgivings into God's hands. It is not getting God into ours.

So our Lord prayed, never doubting for a moment that God would act, but also never doubting for a moment God's wisdom to act as God might see fit. Faith simply trusts God to act as God sees fit in accordance with God's promises.

So Jesus says - All things are possible to one who believes. Of course, not all things that I want to have happen are possible, but all things that God wants to happen are possible - if a person like you or me will trust God by making the venture of obedient response to God's love for us.

So these are the first steps in the sacred journey. Faith is obedient action - in trust to a person - in a specific situation - knowing that God will act. I hope you will return next Sunday as we reflect on some of the conditions of faith. Thanks be to God. Amen.