**St. Paul’s Lutheran Church
Wildwood, Missouri**

**Ninth Sunday after Pentecost**

**August 11, 2019**

**Genesis 15:-1-6; Hebrews 11: 1-16**

I say this quite often but one of the things that I appreciate about the bible is its realism. What I mean by that is that the bible does not try to hide the fact that all people, including those we consider the great heroes of the faith, are flawed and imperfect individuals. This is something that is completely different than all the other religions out there. Just read the Koran some time, for example, and what you will find is that the heroes in that book never waver, never stumble, and never fall short of the glory of *“Allah.”* They are perfect. There is a reason for that and do you know what that is? They have to be because in their view, their salvation depends on them being perfect. Anything short of perfect obedience and submission to Allah and you don’t have a chance to enter paradise.

The bible, by contrast, doesn’t do that at all. The people of God are portrayed as . . . well . . . regular human beings with all their faults exposed. You name the biblical character, Adam, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, King David or any of the twelve apostles, and there will be multiple examples of them failing God. There will be example after example of them acting stupidly and, to be blunt, sinfully. The bible is simply *“real”* about this and does not for a moment try to gloss over the depth of the problem of sin.

That is why I love the bible because, even though I know that you all think I am as close to perfect as it gets . . . I am not. Not by a long shot and the truth is I can relate all too well the failings of our “*heroes of the faith.”* And you know, that encourages me because if God in his mercy reaches out to save what really is this band of misfits called the “*people of God,”* then he can and does in his mercy reach out to save me; one who is equally just as much of a misfit!

Given that, I have to admit that our epistle lesson from Hebrews today puzzles me a bit. Now, if you are not aware of this, Hebrews chapter eleven is known as the *“great faith”* chapter. It is called the *“great faith”* chapter because the author highlights the great heroes of our faith, Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Isaac, Jacob, Gideon and a whole list of others. He writes about the remarkable accomplishments of these men and women all of which were achieved because of one thing: faith. However, here is my dilemma: this chapter in Hebrews presents the faith of these people as being perfect. So, when looking at this Hebrews text it would be easy to think that none of them ever wavered in their faith; not even for a moment. However, as I pointed out earlier, the bible is very realistic about the flaws of all of these people. The record of the Old Testament shows that all of them wavered and had doubts at some point. Consequently, that causes me to ask, *“Given what the Old Testament shows us about these people, how is it that the author of Hebrews presents this picture of such perfect faith?”*

That’s an interesting question. And, it is especially interesting in light of our Old Testament lesson for today because in it we have a clear example of the point I made earlier that our heroes often don’t act very heroically. However, if you look at the Hebrews reading in the bulletin, you will find the chapter in the, *“Faith Hall of Fame.”* That specifically deals with Abraham and what you will see is an Abraham who accomplished great thing all *“by faith.”* He picked up his family, all his belongings, his cattle, his sheep, his servants, everything and moved without knowing where he was going and he did this by faith. Abraham made his home in a foreign land, among strangers and lived in tents, because God promised to make him a great nation and he did this by faith. Even though he was past childbearing age and even though his wife, Sarah, was barren, he became a father at the age of 100 and he did this by faith. What an example? Looking at the greatness of Abraham’s faith kind of puts you in your place doesn’t it? After all, who here would be willing to pack up everything when all God tells you is, “*Just start heading West?”* Who here among our senior saints would be ready to accept the fact that in your retirement years you are going to have another child? Here was a great man of faith who always trusted in what the Lord said. At least that’s the way Hebrews seems to present it.

Look, however, at our Old Testament lesson. The Lord God comes to Abraham and says to him, *“Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.”* Wow! *“Don’t be afraid.”* Why would Abraham be afraid? Is he not a great man of faith? After all, his name made it into Hebrews 11 and the *“Faith Hall of Fame.”* He shouldn’t be afraid.

But, the text is clear. Abraham was afraid and as we catch up to Abraham here we find him in the midst of some very serious doubts. God had made him some pretty big promises and Abraham didn’t see that they were being fulfilled. This great man of faith had some doubts. The question is, *“Why?”*

Well, remember what God had promised him. We talked about this a couple of weeks ago but let me remind you again. Back in chapter 12 God, solely by his grace and mercy, chose Abraham to be the bearer of the promise of the Savior. *“I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.*” All people would be blessed through Abraham. God’s plan to bless all nations, his plans to save the whole world ran straight through Abraham. God would take Abraham, this one man, and through his offspring, he would make the nation of Israel and from Israel, the Christ would come and all nations would be blessed. This was more than just a promise to give Abraham a bunch of children and grandchildren. Abraham, by the grace of God, found himself as a critical component in God’s plan of salvation.

However, there was one problem, and it wasn’t a minor problem at that. When God gave his promise to Abraham, Abraham was seventy-five years old and he was childless. Abraham’s wife Sarah was barren, meaning, she had never been able to have any children and at her age, she never would. The promise that he would become a great nation required a child, a son. Nevertheless, this was the Lord’s promise to Abraham and so Abraham packed up and moved to the Promised Land. Good for Abraham. In that we should commend him here for his faith.

By the time we get to chapter fifteen, however, Abraham is ten years older. He is now eighty-five. The son promised him had not yet come. Abraham wasn’t getting any younger and neither was Sarah. After a decade of waiting, doubts began to creep in to his mind. *“O Sovereign Lord, what can you give since I remain childless. . . You have given me no children.* . .” Obviously, Abraham was struggling a bit with the promise God had made him but, where is the man who so boldly left his homeland to travel to a place even though he did not know where he was going? Where is the man who, when he finally does get a son, offers him as a sacrifice at the Lord’s bequest? Where is the great man of faith we read about in Hebrews? Which is the real Abraham? Is he a great man of faith who accomplished great things for the Lord or a normal man who often feared and had doubts? Which is it? Well, the answer is, my dear friends in Christ . . . both.

You see, the Scriptures do not contradict themselves. Both accounts of Abraham are totally and completely accurate. Abraham was, as Hebrews says, a man of great faith. And, as Genesis shows us, on more than one occasion, Abraham also suffered from doubts and fears. So why can the author of Hebrews speak of him so highly? Well he can for one reason only: Christ Jesus. What we read in the Hebrews account is the way God views those who, as Genesis puts, *“he credits as righteous.”* Because of the faith Abraham had in the promise, because he too trusted in a Savior to come, God saw Abraham’s faithfulness as perfect, as if he never doubted at all.

This is so important for us to understand. The sacrifice of our dear Lord Jesus on the cross, the blood he shed for us hides all the imperfections of our lives before the eyes of God. Let me say that again so that we are clear: the blood of Christ covers all of our imperfections and that means it even covers our imperfect faith. For those who have faith, for you who have faith, God does not see you as a one who ever doubts but as one who never wavers. Why? Because when he looks at you he sees only Jesus who never wavered.

St. Paul puts it this way in Colossians 3:3 “*For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.”* The life that you have lived, a life so often filled with sin and doubt, has by the grace of God been completely wrapped up in Jesus. Your life is hidden in Christ. Once faith grasps hold of the gospel, it is as if God looks at you and me and sees only Christ our Lord and his sinlessness. Jesus’ faith was absolutely perfect and he trusted his Father in all things with no setbacks, no misgivings and no doubts. Jesus was perfect in his faith even as he faced the cross. Think for a moment how perfect the faith, how perfect the trust, Jesus had in his Father. Consider that even as his Father turned from him and as the nails pierced his hands and feet he still looked to heaven with his final, faithful prayer, “*into your hands, I commend my spirit.”* Jesus trusted his Father even when there was no evidence that he should trust him at all. Now that is perfect faith. Jesus’ lived a perfect faith to the end and by grace through faith . . . that perfect faith is now credited to us, or, again as Genesis puts it, *“it is credited to us as righteousness.”*

This is what is so incredible about the gospel. With my life filled with all those imperfections now hidden in Jesus, God in heaven sees me as only perfect. Likewise, with your life hidden in Jesus, he sees you as perfect. That’s God’s reality, yet, my bet is that many here today struggle with doubts about your own faithfulness? Do you doubt that you are strong enough? Do you doubt how firmly you believe? Do you sometimes think, *“I could never be an Abraham.”* I’m sure the answer to all of those questions is, *“yes.”* At times, we all feel this way. Our sinful nature makes us weak when it comes to faith. One of the things I have come to believe is that Christians who act as if they never have doubts about their faith are doing just that . . . they are only acting. I believe that is because there is something intrinsically fearful about admitting that perhaps your faith is a little weak today. That’s scary, because, we are not supposed to have weak faith days. The truth, however, is that we all have weak faith days. We all, and when I say *“we all,”* I include myself, have days when doubts about our faithfulness to God overtake us.

My bet is that many of us have had times when we doubt if we are saved at all. You don’t feel like studying your Bible so you doubt. Getting up for church seems a drag so you doubt. Praying is the last thing on your mind so you doubt. Bad things happen in your life and you wonder if God really cares so you doubt. The doubts are there. Don’t deny them. Don’t doubt that you doubt. Instead, take them to the Lord. Confess them. Seek his forgiveness and focus on the promises that God has made to you. You see, that is exactly what God did for Abraham in today’s Old Testament lesson.

Notice, however, God did chastise or berate Abraham. He did not say, *“Come on Abraham, why can’t you be more like Noah? Gee whiz, look what he did. He built a boat in the middle of the desert and it took him a 120 years!”* No. That would be like a father telling his youngest son, *“What’s the matter with you? Shape up and be more like your big brother.”* Where’s the comfort in that? Where’s the Gospel in that? There is none.

God does not act that way toward his children who come to him and simply say, *“Lord, I’m afraid.”* Remember, as Isaiah tells us, *“A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.”* For Abraham he took him and showed him the heavens. He reaffirmed his word of promise because for God, a promised delayed is not a promise denied. *“Look at the stars Abraham, count them if you. I will make you a great nation.”* Abraham believed and God credited to him as righteousness. In the eyes of God, as the Hebrew author shows us, Abraham lived his life as if he had no doubts at all.

Do your doubts plague you? Look at the promises God has made for you and be comforted. Look at his cross. Look at your crucified and risen Savior, Jesus Christ and remember what I have said so often: it is not the strength of your faith which saves you, it is the strength of your Savior. I’ll repeat that again we all need to have this engraved into our memories! “*It is not the strength of your faith that saves you. It is the strength of your Savior.”* Faith does not save you, Jesus does. Before you go to bed tonight repeat that to yourself. Write it on a note and tape it to your bathroom mirror so that you see it first thing in the morning. Send yourself a a reminder on your cell phone because it is that much of a comfort to troubled souls. Jesus saves you by the same power which held him to the cross. Jesus saves you by his shear strength and his will to bear your sins, even your sins of doubts, in order to make you pure and holy before God.

Remember what he promises, *“to all who received him, to those who believed in his name he gave the right to become the children of God.”* If God, who would not spare even his own son, but gave him up for you - how will he not also, along with his Son, graciously give you all things? He even took care of your sins of doubt; he nailed them to the cross along with all your other sins. This, God promises you.

Could you ever be in the faith *“Hall of Fame?”* Do you doubt it? Dear friends, what Jesus did for you was so perfect that you already are in the faith *“Hall of Fame.”* His blood sets you in the ranks of Noah, Moses, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Name any of the faithful from Scripture and Jesus has set your name right there among them. So great is our Savior, so great his love, so great is his salvation and don’t you ever doubt it! To God be the glory. In Jesus’ name. Amen.