

Promises, Promises

Genesis 18:1-10a
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First Presbyterian Church
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Did you know that the Mona Lisa was stolen from the Louvre in Paris in August of 1911, over 100 years ago? Yes, and it was missing for two years! The really startling thing is during those two years, more people went to stare at the blank space where it used to hang than had gone to look at the painting the previous 12 years.¹

It's not often that what's not there is as captivating and holds more promise than what's right before our eyes, unless we're talking about our faith. In today's Old Testament lesson, Abraham – who is the father of our faith – has been sent by the Lord to the Promised Land, which sounds all good and hopeful ... until he arrives there and spends the next 24 years waiting, waiting on the Lord to fulfill the promise.

That's nearly a quarter century of waiting! How many of us could wait a quarter of a century for God to show up and fulfill his promise, work out his will, for our lives and for our world? Well, truth be told, we've been waiting that long and longer. And still, we wait. You wait for God's promises to be fulfilled everyday, his promise to strengthen you (Ephesians 3:14-16), to give you rest (Matthew 11:28-30), to take care of all your needs (Philippians 4:19), to answer your prayers (Matthew 7:7), to work everything out for the good (Romans 8:28), to be with you (Joshua 1:5, 9), to protect you (Psalm 91:2), to free you from sin (1 John 1:9; John 8:36), to let nothing separate you from God, (Romans 8:38-39), and to give you everlasting life (John 3:16).

Those are just 10 of the more than 3,000 promises in scripture, all of them born of Abraham's faithfulness to go where the Lord sent him, do what the Lord asked of him, and wait for the Lord to bless him. What can we learn from Abraham?

Well, surely, during those 24 years of waiting, Abraham did not sit idle. In fact, throughout the journey, he and his wife, Sarah, and his nephew Lot built a life for themselves rising livestock, which they took with them into the Promised Land. And once there, Abraham did his best be faithful to the Lord, even as he waited. God had promised him offspring, but in all those years Sarah did not become pregnant.

¹ Mona Lisa: The theft that created a legend, Sheena McKenzie, for CNN, Updated 7:26 AM EST, Tue November 19, 2013, <https://www.cnn.com/2013/11/18/world/europe/mona-lisa-the-theft/index.html#:~:text=%E2%80%9C60%20detectives%20seek%20stolen%20Mona,where%20the%20painting%20had%20hung>.

And now, she is too old to do so. This is why in Genesis 15, just before today's reading, Abraham says to the Lord, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." But God says, "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own (child) shall be your heir." And that's when God shows him the stars of heaven, saying, "So shall your descendants be." (Gen. 15:3-5)

We as a church look around for signs of the promise that this church holds, the promise of a long and vibrant future. And as each year rolls by, the trend of diminishing attendance at mainline churches continues. And yet, we don't give up on the promise! No matter what life sends our way, we continue looking for the light at the end of the tunnel. Not that that's easy. It's not.

Take for instance, the three guys who actually went into a real tunnel one day. The pessimist, he saw nothing but darkness. The optimist, he sees a light at the end of the tunnel. The realist, however, takes a look, jumps back and yell, "Train!" The train driver sticks his head out and says, "Three more idiots on my track."

It's not easy going through life looking for the light at the end of the tunnel. But that's what faithful people do. Take our church, for instance. Just like Abraham built a life for himself raising up livestock and being a symbol of faithfulness for all he met, we, too, are blessed to raise up young people in the faith, welcome newcomers into the church, and be a blessing to those we serve.

This community is blessed to have First Church open its heart to them, through our annual Rummage Sale, the Thanksgiving Dinner, the Chocolate Festival and even the Spaghetti Spring Fling that brings together extended families. Not to mention the financial contributions we make to all the agencies listed on our Welcome Center flier – take one later today and think about all we do to be a blessing in this community, and to our members and friends.

Like Abraham, we are busy being a blessing to others even as we wait for future blessings, blessing for ourselves and for our church, which God will bring. In fact, God brings us blessings everyday, every week. Countless church members and friends are faithfully doing the work of this church and blessing the lives of others each day, in ways we may never see or fully appreciate.

But God sees it. And just as he did with the faithfulness of Abraham, God counts it as righteousness for us, today's ministry laying the way for tomorrow's blessings. Abraham did not know the time of God's future blessing as he sat by the oaks of Mamre, in the heat of the day, resting from his labors, year after year. But one day, that blessing came. Genesis tells us that Abraham "looked up and saw three men standing near him," and though he didn't know it, these three men were the embodiment of the Lord.

Being the faithful servant he was, Abraham “ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground.” He says to them, “... Do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree.” Abraham is not letting this chance to serve pass him by.

There’s a lesson in that for us. Let us not miss our chance to serve – either individually or as a church. Let us not be found too busy, uninterested, not there, left early or unprepared when God visits us with the opportunity to be of service, to do the work of the Lord.

This is why we support the ministries of this church through our time, money and talents, as well as doing other service in the community. We do so to ensure that when someone in need arrives, they find it here, in who we are as a church – offering help to meet their need, fellowship to warm their hearts, spiritual growth to feed their souls, a safe place to get away from it all, and the comfort and strength of the Lord to ease their burdens.

Just look at the joy and zeal that Abraham has in ministering to the needs of others. Genesis tells us he “hastened into the tent to Sarah,” saying “Quickly, (make ready) three measures of choice flour” for making bread. And then he “ran to the herd ..., took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it.” Everyone is eager to welcome the three visitors with the best they have to offer.

This is why we strive for excellence in our worship – through music and preaching, songs and prayers, fellowship, care and concern. This is why we prepare Sunday school lessons each week and present them in thoughtful and engaging ways.

Another thing to notice is that three measures of flour are used – three portions of bread for three visitors. It’s not about Abraham and his needs. As Genesis says, he “set (the food) before them and ... stood ... under the tree while they ate.”

It’s not about Abraham and it’s not about us when we’re ministering to others. Those who prepare meals – like the one we had for Bud Dickinson’s family on Friday this past Friday – those who lead and participate in worship including yourselves, those who teach Sunday school and at Wednesday Night Live, those who lead our Bible studies and small groups, and put on our fellowship events and plan our church outings and gatherings and maintain our facilities – we do this, you do this, not for yourselves but for those we serve.

As it was for Abraham, so it is for us. For Abraham, it was in that spirit of faithfulness, that spirit of joy and zeal for the Lord, that spirit of selfless giving and anticipation that the Lord fulfilled his promise to Abraham to breathe new life into his world, a divine promise to raise up faithful people for generations to come, in fulfillment of God’s plan for human kind and for all the earth.

And so it is for our work and ministry here at First Church, which truly is an expression and extension of the promise God made to Abraham. As we continue to live in that faithful spirit of anticipation, let us do so with the sure knowledge that the promise of Abraham – the promise of new life and vitality – lives on in us, through this generation and the generations to come. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Wondrous and generous God, your gifts are overwhelming: Your sun lights the way for our journey, and your stars puncture our darkness. Your living water quenches our thirst, and your broken bread opens the door to eternal life. Your healing touch binds up our wounds, and your forgiveness washes clean our sin.

Wondrous and generous God, from the four corners of the earth, a chorus of praise erupts. The ocean roars and the trees shout their joy. From the deepest depths of our being, our prayer gropes to find words of adoration.

For you are patient and kind, even as we wander, lured by the trivial and attracted by the quick solution. For you are full of compassion and truth, even as we stumble in relationships and hesitate at the doors of justice.

Come now, wondrous and generous God. Surprise those whose days are filled with sameness and whose joy has ceased.

Bring comfort to those who agonize over broken relationships, who mourn the death of what used to be. Touch those whose bodies need healing, and bring your peace and comfort.

Come now, wondrous and generous God. Liberate those whose distractions and addictions rob them of their full potential.

Make this church a place where seeds grow, joy is shared, songs are sung, peace is shaped, dreams are born, sorrow is graced and ripples of love spread.

We pray this in the sure and faithful Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,

as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.