

The Movement of Faith

Genesis 12:1-9

Psalm 33:1-12

Romans 4:13-25

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

This past week I was speaking with a parishioner who is a retired Navy Aviation Rescue Swimmer. His stories always make me emotional. There's something incredibly moving about our country's heroes who sacrifice so much, take on illogical risks, often sacrificing their own lives for the sake of others. Rescue Swimmers do not jump from a helicopter into raging waters because they believe the water is safe. They do it because they trust the voice on the radio and they trust those they have trained beside. As I have been thinking about faith this week and of our hero Abraham, Navy swimmers keep coming to mind. Their motto is "So Others May Live".

Abraham is called the Father of Faith. We honor his memory and talk glowingly about the virtue of faith. But passages like today's readings invite us to look closer at the faith we so often admire from afar. Abraham's life was marked by one **act** of faith after another. His choices are what mark him as a man of faith.

Genesis 12 gives the broad brushstrokes of Abram's life. The important thing to note is that, throughout his life, he traveled nearly 2,500 miles on foot, repeatedly uprooted his family, placing them in jeopardy, and he did not live to see the fulfillment of the divine promises...all because he believed what God said. He was given no proof, and had no certainty, but he spent his life moving away from comfort and safety towards a future God spoke to him on behalf of people he would never know. As much as we like to laud Abram's faith, we don't often look closely at the apparent absurdity of it or the cost. Today, let's consider both.

Faith, by definition, is absurd to the outside observer. It is confidence in something that cannot be seen or proven. Faith is based on relational confidence. It knows the person

and so it behaves based on trust in that. In Genesis, God tells Abram to go. In today's gospel, Jesus essentially tells Matthew to come. Both requests defied logic. God's call to Abram told him to leave his country, his kindred, and his father's house. He wasn't just being asked to leave a familiar homeland. He was asked to leave the security of his extended family and the comfort and safety of his own household. They didn't have cell phones and commuter trains. He was leaving everything behind forever, cutting ties entirely. At 75 years old, he was being asked to forfeit the identity he had spent a lifetime building. For Matthew, it was much the same. He had already betrayed his own people by working for Rome. Now he was being asked to leave the safety the income from that employment provided. Not only that but following Jesus would put him at odds with Roman government and with the Jewish religious leaders.

In neither of these stories is a timeline given. There is no itinerary for the path ahead, no guarantees of comfort or safety. According to Paul, Abram didn't blithely or blindly obey without first counting the cost. Paul says that Abram "considered his own body, which was already as good as dead". And "he considered the bareness of Sarah's womb". He knew he did not have the capacity to do what God was asking of him. - He could have stayed where he was known. He could have held onto his security and comforts. But He believed God. He trusted God's ability to do what he could not, and he went. In Matthew's case, Jesus said, "follow me". Jesus wasn't asking him to observe from a distance. Jesus was saying, "come attach your life with mine, go wherever I go, and do what I do". The interesting thing about these stories is they don't detail the process of relational development. They simply say a call was offered and then followed. There is something about our encounters with God that connect with our soul. When we are present to God, faith is a gift and its power is stronger than the connection we experience in any other relationship.

Paul says that Abraham believed God and that belief is available to us as well. The word for belief comes from the Hebrew word "aman". It is where we get the word Amen. Amen means, I entrust myself to this reality. It is not about intellectual assent or even having

observed or acquired proof of God's faithfulness. Amen is the choice we make to move our bodies towards God's leading, no matter how terrified we are, no matter how much others, or even our own minds condemn us for our stupidity. Biblical belief is Amen.

Belief requires something from us. There are two things faith requires from everyone. Faith requires forfeiting our right to understand. Faith also requires movement towards God. Faith doesn't generally live in a pew. For those of us with operational hands and feet, faith will physically take us places we cannot now imagine. But for all of us, faith will move our hearts beyond the confines of our current experience.

Faith is relational. It requires our movement towards God. An unclean woman who had suffered for twelve years moved towards Jesus saying, "If I only touch his cloak". Jesus turned from the direction he was headed. He looked at her, observed the fact that her faith was so strong it made her go near people the law said she must withdraw from. Her faith made her reach towards his garment, knowing her touch would make him ritually unclean. But she knew his love would heal her. She trusted and she risked. There's something so powerful about trusting God with our most vulnerable needs, that moving towards Jesus positions us for healing. Movement into the life of God is relational and somehow reciprocal. Immediately before this event, a man comes to Jesus asking him to raise his daughter from the dead! It was less a request than a statement, but it carried the same invitational weight as "follow me". "Jesus got up and followed him". Mere verses before this, Matthew "got up and followed" Jesus. We are invited into the dance of faith. But faith is **embodied** loyalty, an orientation with movement towards a new reality.

Today's stories of Jesus illustrate the way faith invited his followers to release their insistence on comprehending him. Not only did Jesus call a tax collector to become part of the disciples' elite group, that same evening they were expected to join Jesus in table fellowship with sinners. We Episcopalians are great at believing our inclusivity instantly absolves us of judgy-ness. But friends, Jesus was sitting down to a meal, essentially

signaling that he saw himself as a social equal and in mutual support of those he was eating with. And he was eating with those who were complicit with the government in exploiting powerless people for profit. That meal shows Jesus cared more about showing love to potentially hateful people than he did his own moral virtue by avoiding them. Additionally, eating with these people would likely have made the disciples ritually impure, excluding them from temple worship. Jesus didn't need the disciples to behave religiously or understand his priorities. He invited them to bind their lives with his, to trust that relationship, even when it led them places they did not think they should be. Faith leaves the need for clarity behind because it trusts God's love.

Faith starts with an Amen, a choice that agrees with belief and then acts. Faith is a gift, but we can, however, position ourselves to be ready for the movement part by practicing the yes. Paul says Abraham did not **allow** distrust to make him waver. He may have honestly acknowledged the limitations of his situation, but he did not linger there. Instead, "He grew strong in his faith AS HE gave glory to God". Our Psalm in a hymn honoring God's ability to create out of nothingness. Our Psalmist encourages the righteous to sing praises to God, to remind ourselves that "The word of the Lord is right, and all his works are sure". Abraham built altars in the places he encountered God so he would remember for himself and have a visible reminder to share with others.

Each week we come together around this altar. Here we remind ourselves and one another, just as Abraham did, that God is the one who "gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist". Our faith is in a God who can do impossible things, but following Jesus means first following him into death. We may have to die to the life we know. We may have to trust God with the people or places we love. But Jesus is the one who raised the dead and proved his own supremacy over death. We may not understand the how or why of God's call, but as we come, God will strengthen our hearts into faith and resurrection life.

May we be a people who entrust ourselves fully to God's reality, refusing to waver, growing strong as we move ever closer to our Savior. A people of embodied faith, so others may live.