

FIRST, my apologies to Janet and Nina! I just looked at my calendar hoping that I had nothing scheduled tomorrow only to find that I should have looked at it last night. It was my turn for coffee hour and I totally forgot. I am so sorry! Janet is doing a wonderful job freeing up the Deacons and Nina picked up my slack today. I am so sorry!

It was a lovely spring day in South Bristol today?! And to my unpracticed ear, it sounds like the Bell Choir is coming together for Easter! There are nine of us and it is fun!

I had a lovely surprise this morning after the service. David Ray, the former Pastor of Bristol Mills UCC and author of many books on 'small church' (many of which I have) stopped in to make a gift of his newest book, "Smaller Churches: Real Possibilities for Hard Times" to me and to the church. This will be wonderful for our Lent Bible Study which resumes this Friday at 4:00. At some point, he indicated that he would be willing to meet with us. He is a wonderful resource!

LIGHTING THE PEACE AND JUSTICE CANDLE May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart. May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace. May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and to turn their pain into joy. May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done. May the peace of God and the God of peace be with you for evermore. Amen

HEBREW SCRIPTURE Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

EPISTLE Philippians 3:17-4:1

GOSPEL READING Luke 13:31-35

MESSAGE *An Unknown Future*

Pastor Beth Hood

If I were to speak about a great man of faith, or a great woman, I wonder what sort of person would come to mind.

We might think of someone who turns his back on the pleasures of the world to devote themselves to a life of prayer in a monastery.

Or someone in the mold of the reformers who would stand up for their convictions even when that went against what was popular and what was safe.

We might think of brothers and sisters in other parts of the world who are prepared to go to jail or worse rather than give up their commitment to Christ.

Or if you're very fortunate, someone nearer to home whose presence gives off the kind of deepest peace which only a life of faith can create.

Any of those examples would have much to commend them and much for us to be inspired by. The problem is that when we do think of people like that they don't always seem to have a lot in common with people like us. Such strong convictions so boldly lived out can seem to have little connection to our lives, riddled as we often feel with all our doubts and confusion and compromises.

This morning we have read of one incident from the life of someone who, more than anyone else, is known as being a great man of faith. Indeed, Abraham is not only held in great esteem in the Christian scriptures, he is equally held up as an example of faith among Jews and Muslims. They all consider themselves to be children of Abraham. He is the founding father of the faith.

So much so that in all our writings God is defined as being the God of Abraham. When God speaks in the Old Testament that is often how he identifies himself—"I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob..." A pretty good recommendation!

And if that was where we left it, we might all prepared to feel hopelessly inadequate once again in the shadow of such greatness. But there is more to this figure, this 'father of the faith' than we often assume. His particular kind of faith may be much easier for people like you and me to relate to than we might expect.

There are moments when he demonstrates strong faith and clear conviction. When he left his home to set out on a journey with no known destination, just because he believed that God had called him to do that. Or when he gave his nephew, Lot, the first choice of the land when they came to divide it up, trusting that God would look after him wherever he ended up. Or when he rescued Lot after his town had been overrun and ransacked, refusing any reward because he did not want anyone to be able to say that riches came from anyone but God.

And the best-known story, the story that helped define faith for me, his willingness to kill his only son if he believed that was what God demanded.

All of that gives him a legendary quality, a bit out of our league when it comes to faith. However, when you follow his whole story we can also see that his faith was never in fact easy or clear cut. Frequently we find him doubting if God will really keep his promises, or growing impatient because it is all going far too slowly.

Frequently we find him acting in ways which suggest that he really didn't trust God to look after him and provide for him. There are two separate stories of powerful men attracted to his wife, Sarah. Abraham was afraid they would kill him in order to get her. He claimed she was his sister and let them have her, accepting generous rewards in the process. Where was his faith then?

God had promised him that he would have descendants which would be as widespread as the dust on the ground and as numerous as the stars in the sky. But, still childless, he seems to have signed a contract to adopt one of his servants as his next of kin. And even after the assurances are repeated in our passage this morning, he soon decides his only hope of having children to get one of his female servants pregnant, which he does. Where was his faith then?

So what makes Abraham so special that three of the major religions of the world should look to him as their founder and as some sort of hero? What might there be in his life that we might possibly learn anything from?

Ultimately, it is not Abraham's faith in God which makes him noteworthy. It is God's faith in him. God has promised to bless him-and God will bless him, no matter how many times he gets it wrong.

That is why this story is so fundamental to religious faith, because it takes us back to the foundation of it all; that it is faith in God and not faith in our ability to be good enough, or to believe enough, or to try hard enough. It is faith in God's generosity and mercy and faithfulness, and not in ourselves. That is hard to accept in this culture where we are expected to earn anything we get, where rewards have to be achieved. But the Bible goes out of its way to make it clear that the blessing of God does not come about because there is anything special about the people God blesses, but because of this special quality of God.

What Abraham's story tells us is that the difference between a great man or woman of faith and a man or woman who might be very ordinary indeed, but whose life has been caught up by a great big faith. It is the faith which is great, not the person.

The Old Testament is full of characters mothers might not hold up to their children as ideals of moral living. Samson, King David and even Moses all had blood on their hands. In the New Testament we read about people we now refer to as saints. Anyone who knew Peter might find that amusing. And Paul was happy to describe himself as the worst of sinners. The one thing about the lives of men like these which we find inspiring is that their living was caught up in a great faith, and that they managed to hold to that faith, even if at times they held on only by the tips of their fingers.

Their faith did not make them perfect. And it didn't solve their problems. But it raised them above the level of that which is mundane and material, and it drew them into the big story of what life is really all about.

Their faith allowed them to believe that their lives had purpose and significance beyond what they could see with their eyes. It allowed them to believe that they were held in the hands of God, and that whatever happened, whatever bad thing happened to them or whatever bad thing they did he would not let them go. It is the faith that is great, not the people.

I find that reassuring, that the faith has not changed. God has promised to bless us, and God will bless us, no matter how many times we get it wrong or mess up.

Abraham becomes an example for us, because despite all his mistakes and his confusion and his doubts, he managed to hold on to his belief that God would take care of him. And in the end, that proves to be enough, and promises are fulfilled, and the purposes of God come to fruition.

This is the sheer, undeserved, wildly generous grace of God, and this is still the God we are invited to have faith in. The God of Abraham who desires to gather his children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings. The God of Abraham who will give his son a cross for the sins of the world. The God of Abraham in whom we can have faith, for he has promised to bless us—and he will bless us, no matter how many times we get it wrong.