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Series: Heroes of the Faith

Title: *Abraham: The Basics of Faith*

Preacher: Mark Adams

Scripture: Hebrews 11

Thank you, Don, for the reminder that to get through this pandemic we must keep our eyes on God. Our faith in Him is the anchor we can cling to in these turbulent times.

Now, you may have noticed I'm sitting just outside the elevator door on the middle level beneath that quilt that was given to our church by the women of *Amani ya Juu* in Kenya. I picked this place because it reminds me of one of Redland's faith Heroes---Cathie Burke. You see, Cathie is a lot like the first person I want us to study as we begin a sermon series on the Heroes of Faith listed in Hebrews 11. I'm referring to Abraham. Like Abe, Cathie followed God's call to a strange new land---Kenya--where she has faithfully served our Lord and the refugee women of Amani for nearly 20 years. I know it will embarrass Cathie to no end for me to say this, but Cathie Burke has the faith of Abraham. When this pandemic struck, she could have returned to the U.S., but in faith she has stayed and continues to serve there. We are thankful for the example you set Cathie!

Okay, enough of embarrassing Cathie, let's begin our study. You may remember that Abraham was from Ur, the region of the world where the Tower of Babel had been built, which means he grew up and lived in a pagan society that thrived four thousand years ago.

Abraham was probably a well-educated, cultured man. I say this because archeologists have excavated Ur and found it to have been a place where society was very advanced---much more advanced than historians originally thought. For example, they found a great library there with clay tablets bearing the records of thriving commerce, literature, and religion. They dug up the foundations of huge structures; homes, palaces, and public buildings that rival those we make today. I mean Ur was a great place to live---I think of it as the "Big Apple" of its day. In fact, like New York City, Ur was a port city situated in the fertile area between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

As I said, the people were religious, but pagan with priests who offered human sacrifices. Abraham would have been very familiar with this because according to Joshua, his father Terah was deeply involved in the false religion of the area. The Mishnah says Terah was a craftsman who made and sold idols for a living.

Well, for some reason, God chose this well-educated but pagan man to found His chosen people---the NATION of Israel. One day The Lord said to Abram---as he was known at the time--"***Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. 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 and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.***" (Gen 12)

Now think of this for a moment. Abram was from an idol worshipping culture and we know that idols can't talk, so, when Abram heard God speaking to Him; well he knew something special, unprecedented, was happening. And he decided to obey this voice.

Like Cathie, he left his culture with all its benefits and headed out. This pagan man would never again sleep under a roof. No, for the rest of his long life he would be a tent-dweller.

But, the fact that Abraham was a pagan isn't the only thing that makes us wonder about God choosing him to be the father of His chosen nation. There was also Abraham's age. He and his wife, Sarah were old. He was 75

and she was ten years his junior. I know 75 is the new 40, but Sarah was also infertile, barren, childless. But Abraham still obeyed. He left for who knows where, following the voice of God Who told him in spite of his age and his wife's barrenness; he would be the father of a great nation. And this fact shows that Abraham was indeed a man of faith. In fact, Abraham's entire life is a story of faith and perhaps for this reason some say that, with the exception of Jesus Christ, Abraham is the most important person in the Bible.

If nothing else, the amount of SPACE in the Bible that is devoted to his life shows his importance. I mean, fourteen chapters are set aside to tell of his life story---plus there are tons of other references to Abraham throughout the Bible and, as I said, when you put it all together it's a story of FAITH.

Let me put it this way.

- Moses was a great LAWGIVER.
- Joshua was a great MILITARY LEADER.
- David was Israel's most BRILLIANT KING.
- Elijah was its most influential PROPHET.

Each of these men was great—but each of these men would have confessed in an instant that Abraham was his father in FAITH. In fact, Abraham's faith led to his being referred to as *"the friend of God"* three times. No one else is given that title. Paul goes so far as to refer to Abraham as *"the father of all who BELIEVE."*

Okay, what can Abraham's example teach us about faith? What can he show us about walking by faith and not sight?

(1) First, he shows us that faith is only as good as its OBJECT.

Now, in spite of the fact that Abraham is repeatedly presented as the MODEL for faith, a close look at his story shows that in the beginning his faith was not very impressive. I mean, in Genesis 12 God came to Abram and told him to leave his home---and he did. But, in the very next episode in Abraham's life, Abraham and Sarah have travelled to Egypt and when they arrived Abraham said to Sarah: *"Honey, you're a beautiful woman, and I know these Egyptians. As soon as they lay eyes on you someone will want to take you as his wife, and he will kill me in order to do so. So, let's lie. Let's tell them you are my sister so they won't kill me. If one of them wants you, they can have you, but I'll live."* It doesn't sound like Abraham is very confident that God will protect him does it?! Well, in Genesis 20 Abraham and Sarah do this *"she's my sister"* thing with another pagan ruler.

Then after 11 years of waiting for a child, Sarah says to Abraham: ***"We've tried it God's way but it's been long time. Why don't you have a child with my servant girl, Hagar?"*** Did Abraham say no? Did he say, *"I will not do that Sarah, we have to trust God?"* No! Abraham agreed that it was a good idea, and like all times when we do things because we think we know better than God, it was a disaster that the world still suffers from today.

Then 13 years later, God tells Abraham that Sarah will bear him a child. Does Abraham say, *"I believe You, God?"* No. Abraham fell on his face, laughed at God under his breath, and said, ***"Will a son be born to a man 100 years old?"*** And Sarah laughed, too. Then the Lord said to Abraham, ***"Why did Sarah laugh? Is anything too hard for ME?"*** Does Abraham man up and admit that HE laughed? No. He said nothing.

So—to review:

- Abraham's faith is so weak that he pretends Sarah is not his wife, twice.
- His faith is so weak that he impregnates a servant girl.
- His faith is so weak that he laughs at God.

Yet centuries later Paul says that Abraham's faith was such that he believed beyond all hope. So, what's going on? Why would Paul say that about this guy?

Well, to answer these questions we have to go back and try to enter Abraham's world. When Abraham first said yes to God, he began literally from scratch. There was no Old Testament. How many of the Ten Commandments did Abraham know? None. There were no Ten Commandments. The story of Moses, Mount Sinai, the giving of the Law, the consecration of priests, the story of David, the Psalms, and sacrifices---none of this had occurred yet. He didn't know any stories about the Lord God, Yahweh. He had zero information. He was the product of a brutal, superstitious, ancient culture. Abraham was raised like everybody else in Ur; raised as a pagan in a pagan world.

So, Genesis 12:1 is Abraham's FIRST INTERACTION with the living, good, all-powerful, personal God, the one true God. God says to Abraham, ***"Go from your country, your people, your father's household, to the land I will show you."*** And it is at this point that we SEE Abraham's faith. Because, ***"Abram WENT, as the LORD had told him."***

Abraham is not presented in the Old Testament as a brilliant spiritual genius. No, he is an average, ignorant, confused, superstitious, passive, and cowardly man. So why do we say his faith was so strong? It was because at age 75 he had enough faith to obey God and leave Ur. Abraham decided to put his faith—weak and immature though it be—in God.

And it was a faith that GREW over the years—grew such that when he was 100 he chose to wait for God to provide him a son. Abraham eventually had the faith to see that ONLY GOD could do that. Paul says Abraham knew that at this point in his life his body was as good as dead. He was an old man with an old wife. No pharmaceutical company could help him start a nation. But Abraham did not allow his life to be determined by what was possible with human power. He was completely dependent on God, God alone.

Abraham's dad, Terah, might have had stronger faith, but he put his faith in the wrong gods. Abraham put his faith in the right God. Yes, it was an immature faith—a LITTLE faith at first—but THAT'S THE POINT. You see, it was better for him to put a LITTLE faith in a BIG God than BIG faith in a LITTLE god.

This is good news for us! This is why Jesus says you only need faith the size of a mustard seed. Why? Because it is not about the size of your FAITH; it's about the size of your GOD. Pastor Tim Keller talks about when the Israelites escaped from Egypt. Remember? Pharaoh pursued them, and God parted the Red Sea. The Israelites went through the sea on dry ground with a wall of water on their right and a wall of water on their left.

Keller says some of them probably loved it. They said things like, *"In your face, Pharaoh. Eat your heart out. We are cruising now!"* And, no doubt as they ran, OTHERS said: *"We're going to die. I'm going to die!"* Not all of them expressed the same caliber of faith, but they were ALL equally saved—because it is not the QUALITY of your faith that saves you, it's the OBJECT of your faith that saves you.

That's the good news of the Gospel. That's why Paul said, ***"[Abraham] is our father in the sight of God, in Whom he believed."*** (Romans 4:17) What God is that? Paul says it, ***"The God Who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that are not."*** (Romans 4:17)

I love this quote from James Dunn: *"The character of Abraham's faith is determined by the character of the God in Whom he believed."*

Abe's hope was not in how strong his faith was; his hope was in God. What God? The God to Whom all our problems---all the things that cause us fear---INCLUDING this mighty pandemic are less than a speck of fine dust on a pair of scales.

Here's a second thing we can learn about walking by faith from Abraham.

(2) Faith is OBEDIENCE.

Remember Abraham's faith first showed up when he obeyed God and left Ur. And leaving Ur must have been hard. As I said it was a port city with a flourishing trade. The land had rich soil watered by two rivers; soil that produced corn and date palms, apples, grapes, pomegranates and tamarisks. I mean, it was no small thing to leave a country like that and set off across the Arabian Desert to an unknown land and presumably less desirable land. Yet this is what God told him to do. He also told Abraham to leave his people.

Again, I can't help but think of Cathie. She left behind the security of friends and family and familiarity and go to a new unfamiliar place. But that's what God asked her to do and like Abe, she had enough faith to do that.

This is a very important principle of faith, for as Hebrews 11:1 says, ***"Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we DO NOT SEE."*** Abraham showed his faith because he obeyed---he got off his couch in Ur and took action. The questions were not all answered. He didn't know how everything was going to work out, but he knew what God had asked of him and he obeyed.

And, let me just remind you at this point that faith SHOWS. Obeying God, is a visible thing. As James says, ***"Faith is something that is seen in what we DO."*** (James 2:18) As you probably know, during the pandemic, when the virus was spreading through New York City like wildfire, Samaritan's purse set up a field hospital in Central Park. Cathie sent us a video posted by a man who lives in a townhouse that looks out over Central Park---which tells you he is a very wealthy man. In the video this man confessed that he is a wealthy, liberal, atheist and that before the pandemic he had all kinds of negative opinions about Christians. But, he saw the faith of those volunteers who came to ground zero of this plague, to help people---HIM, HIS NEIGHBORS. And it moved him---moved him to tears. Their obedience melted his heart toward believers. In fact, he decided to volunteer to help and spent several days working to set up the hospital. One day he even spent thousands of his own dollars to buy food for the doctors and nurses. He hasn't put his faith in Jesus yet, but SEEING the faith of those Christians moved him to tears. He SAW that their faith was genuine. I mean, they risked their lives to come and serve in that hot zone. I hope you will pray with me that what he saw will lead HIM to put his faith in Jesus.

That leads to one more faith lesson Abraham's example teaches us:

(3) Faith is TRUSTING God when it doesn't make sense.

As I said, Abraham's famous faith grew; especially when their son Isaac was finally born and both Sarah and Abraham learned that God always has the last laugh. In this and other experiences Abraham discovered that nothing was impossible for God. He saw time and again that God COULD make a way when there was no way. He learned to have FAITH in God's power and love. But Abraham's faith story wasn't over. When Isaac was about 15 years old---just about the time he got his "camel driving license," God asked Abraham to do an impossible thing. He said, ***"Take your son, your only son, whom you love---Isaac---and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you."***

Now, Abraham knew what was being asked of him because, as I said, he was a native of Ur---a place where human sacrifice was practiced. Can you imagine what Abraham thought? *"I don't understand this God! You just GAVE me this son in my old age and now You want me to sacrifice him? This makes no sense!"*

But even so, he obeyed and so did Isaac. Remember, he was 15 at the time and could have easily overpowered his 115-year-old dad. But they both obeyed God—trusted Him—and TRUE to His character, God stopped Abraham in mid-thrust and provided a lamb for the sacrifice instead. That's what HEROIC faith is like! It's believing even when it doesn't make sense. It's believing that even though we can't understand how God is working in all things for our good.

You know all those quarantined cruise ships we've seen on the news lately? Well they are all made out of steel. And if you take any single part; be it a steel plate out of the hull or the huge rudder, and throw that part into the ocean, it would sink. Steel doesn't float! So, building a ship out of pieces of steel that sink doesn't make sense. But when the shipbuilders are finished, when the last plate has been riveted in place, then that massive steel ship is virtually unsinkable. It doesn't make sense---but it works.

There are parts of our lives that don't make sense; it feels like our fears are going to sink us, but we trust God anyway, believing He is building something, working in all that, to make something good, something unsinkable. We don't know how God is using this PART of our lives for our good and His glory, but we have faith that He is.

Someday we'll look back on this pandemic and thank Him for that good. It doesn't make sense NOW---but have faith---one day it will.

If you're watching and like that guy in Central Park, you have not put your faith in Jesus, I hope you will today--right now. It's not complex; just tell God you are a fallen being, that you do bad things, think bad thoughts---like the rest of us. Tell him you have decided to believe Jesus is His Son and that He died for your fallenness on the cross. Ask for His forgiveness and tell Him that like Abraham, you will follow wherever He leads.

If you ARE a Christian---this is a great day to recommit yourself to more faithfully following God. Let's do that by singing.

*Wherever He leads I'll go! Wherever He leads I'll go!
I'll follow my Christ Who loves me so. Wherever He leads I'll go!*

Amen.

If you want to talk to me about a decision you made today, contact me.

This week in our video devotions that we post Monday through Thursday---our staff will lead us to look at the lessons we can learn from the great hymns of the faith. So, join us and get ready to sing along! Now, say it with me:

*Let the PEACE OF CHRIST rule in your hearts
since as members of one body
you were called to peace.
Let the WORD OF CHRIST dwell in you richly
and whatever you do...in word or in deed
Do it all in the NAME OF CHRIST
giving thanks to God the Father through Him.*