

Trust That God Has Your Back

Second Sunday in Lent
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

When you're a flyer, you need to trust your bases and backspots. Cheerleaders would understand my terminology here. My oldest daughter Sarah is a cheerleader at Camp Hill High School. Owing to my genes, she is stuck with a rather petite stature, so Sarah is designated a flyer. Those are the cheerleaders who are hoisted up in the air, held aloft on the strong shoulders and arms of other cheerleaders known as bases, then watched over as they descend by the cheerleaders known as backspots. Cheerleaders practice these stunts over and over again. But even with all that practice, it is true that ultimately, in order to be a flyer, you need to **trust** your bases and backspots. I admit that a number of times Sarah's Mom watched her "fly" and even if Sarah trusted her bases and backspots, I didn't trust them. I always gave a sigh of relief when Sarah was back on solid ground, safe and sound and upright.

Maybe it was all that practice that helped Sarah trust her fellow cheerleaders. Maybe it was the relationships—the friendships and camaraderie established over the years. Whatever it was, Sarah had to trust them, else she would never have flown.

What enables us to trust someone or something? I suppose when a person has proven themselves reliable, we will trust them to continue to be so. Or when a strong relationship has developed over time, one party will trust the other party to continue in that relationship. Is that what happened here between Abraham and the Lord God in our lessons this morning? Has the Lord God proven himself reliable in the promises he made to Abraham, the covenant he established with Abraham? Or, has their relationship become strong enough that one party trusts the other party will continue in that relationship? Hard to say, since much of what the Lord God promised to Abraham and his wife Sarah hasn't yet been fulfilled by the point reached in our 1st lesson. There's no real son, no line of descendants, no great nation yet visible on the horizon. Lots of promises made; nothing substantial delivered. And as for the relationship that exists between the Lord God and Abraham, strong as it is—this relationship in which God promises to be Abraham's God—it still hasn't shielded Abraham from experiencing great difficulties thus far in his life: worries and fears, conflict with family, threats from powerful leaders, old age and its challenges. So why should Abraham trust God?

Look, isn't it a risk to trust someone or something? It can be pretty much a crap shoot. After all, the most reliable people can disappoint us. The strongest of institutions can't back up their promises. Companies who made products with only the highest of standards or who generated a deep and loyal relationship with their employees may still fail. Past experience means nothing.

I'm wearing my favorite watch. It's a Timex. My husband Randy and I have purchased a number of Timex watches over the years. In fact, I still have one of those antiquated wind-up kind. (I'll have you know it's outlasted my 8-track tapes and my Smith-Corona electric typewriter.) Timex watches are consistently reliable. Didn't John Cameron Swayze in all those Timex commercials, after a representative watch was stomped on by an elephant or went through a deluge of water, always say "Takes a lickin' and keeps on tickin'"? But right now Randy and I are waging a small war with Timex over a \$5 rebate. I know, sounds silly. Timex says we didn't send in all the information needed for the rebate, and sent us back our envelope and rebate form, but never told us what information we neglected to provide. So we re-sent it with a cover letter explaining we had followed all instructions properly, filled in all the information, so what were we missing? Then Timex wrote back that **now** we couldn't receive the rebate because we sent it in too late. (That's only because they sent back our envelope after the deadline.) What's with Timex? Why not just give us our \$5 rebate? If you can't trust Timex, who can you trust?

Meanwhile, on a much larger scale, some people are wondering, "If you can't trust your old friend Bernie Madoff with your savings, who can you trust?" From the bank that handled your mortgage to the mutual fund in which you invested your 401K to the airline pilot taking you cross country to the company that processes the peanut butter crackers you pack for lunch . . . if you can't even trust those who have been reliable in the past, is there ultimately anything, anyone you can trust?

Why in the world should Abraham trust the Lord God? Well, maybe we shouldn't be **asking** that question.

For the point is Abraham **does** trust the Lord God. When we read these early chapters in Genesis, and when we hear today's 2nd lesson (Paul's letter to the Romans), we discover Abraham trusted God. Abraham had faith that what the Lord God promised, God would indeed do. That faith wasn't necessarily based on any past experience of reliability. It wasn't based on anything Abraham himself could do on his part to make sure the promises were eventually fulfilled. It wasn't the reassuring presence of some money-back guarantee or the threat of litigation should there be the failure of promise-fulfillment that made Abraham trust God. If one of those reasons had been the reason for Abraham's trust, writes Paul, then faith would be based on the Law—the *quid pro quo* of how goods and services are rendered, how contracts are established and honored, how commandments are followed and blessings dished out between God and his people. That means faith would not be based on **grace**. It would not be based on the free gift from God.

The truth of this story is that Abraham and his wife Sarah choose to trust the Lord God, admittedly hoping against hope, believing God when there is nothing there in front of them that should convince them to believe God. But then look what happens. **Because** of their faith, because they trust God will fulfill his promises, they actually move forward in their lives. They don't remain immobilized by fear of the unknown, but instead journey on, even going out on limb and taking some risks. Along the way they learn and grow. Paul writes that it is faith alone that propels Abraham on his journey. It's faith alone that keeps him going. And it's faith alone that makes his relationship right with God.

Now, I have to admit Paul makes Abraham sound nearly perfect in his faithfulness. Paul writes in Romans: *No distrust made Abraham waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God.* I think Paul places Abraham on a little too high a pedestal here. Actually, reading the accounts of Abraham's journeys in Genesis makes clear he did indeed waver in his faith and trust at times. **As all of us do.** Twice in Genesis you can read situations where Abraham feared for his life. He worried that he might be killed by someone who would want to have his wife Sarah for their own—because Sarah was so exceedingly beautiful—so Abraham pretended twice that Sarah wasn't his wife, but rather his sister. Really created a heap of trouble in the process. Those were moments he just didn't trust God to be with him on that journey—he didn't trust God would **be** his God—**be** his base and backspot.

That appears to be Peter's problem as well. The disciple Peter initially indicates trust in Jesus prior to today's Gospel passage. For Peter confesses aloud in verse 29, just two verses earlier, that Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed One from God who has come to save his people. But the very moment Jesus suggests that this particular Messiah will suffer and die in order to save his people, Peter's trust doesn't just waver, it goes out the window! Peter returns to trusting himself and his own preconceived notions of what a Messiah ought to be. Instead of relying on Jesus' authority and wisdom on the subject, instead of trusting Jesus the Messiah to know what it means to be the Messiah, Peter arrogantly relies on human wisdom, such as it is. Peter's distrust is evident here. No wonder he is so strongly rebuked by Jesus before others.

But, you know, eventually Abraham and Peter **will** trust the God who is both creator (calling into existence that which did not exist) and redeemer (giving life to the dead.) In other stories in the Bible, we learn that when Abraham and Peter (and, in fact, numerous other people) **trust** God, they do not stagnate. They aren't immobilized with fear. Instead, they move forward in their lives, grow and learn and serve, and take risks which ultimately bear much good fruit in this world for the kingdom. And most important—while they are journeying, they experience God near to them, upholding them, on strong shoulders. These people of faith are our cloud of witnesses who encourage us to live lives of faith.

You and I stand at a moment in history when trust is a priceless commodity. (Should have taken stock out on *that*.) We face a global economic situation in which the very institutions and mechanisms we thought were sturdy and secure enough to withstand the winds of human folly are now seen for what they are—clearly unreliable and untrustworthy, precisely because they are human institutions and mechanisms. It is, for many people around the world, a troubling, fearful time. After all, who or what can you trust?

God's Word to us this day is that **God** is to be trusted. Faith in God is his expectation for us as his people. That's how God wants us to be. His promise is that when we **live** our lives trusting him, God will powerfully interact with us, work his gracious will through us, and then bless and sustain us through all things. **AMEN.**

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