

Pastor Roy's sermon from March 4, 2012

Grace, Mercy, and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

What is faith? What does it mean to have faith?

Is faith certainty of something that is unprovable? Is faith having no doubt?

Is faith something that gets you healed? Is it something you either have or don't? Does it mean you are a good person? Does faith sometimes make us wonder whether we are good *enough*?

And how does faith grow? Does faith open your mouth or your ears?

Genesis teaches us about Abraham's faith. How did he live his faith? Was it perfect certainty? Was Abraham always full of trust in God?

Whenever they travel, he and Sarah explain that they are brother and sister. They had the same father but different mothers. They left off the part about being married. Abraham was afraid a ruler would kill him and take Sarah for a wife, so he would just give her over from the start. This happens twice in the storyline. Bizarre.

Also, Abraham has a child through Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian servant. Sarah was unlikely to conceive since she was beyond the usual childbearing years, so they figured this would be one way for Sarah to provide for Abraham a child. Later, Abraham is told that a child will be born to Sarah. When he hears that, he laughs because this makes no sense given Sarah's age. It wasn't laughter of faithful joy but of pure shock. But Abraham's faith allows him to rearrange his expectations and begin to trust that nothing is impossible with God. Its not about having perfect faith, its more about openness to God and willingness to learn.

Like all of us, Abraham lives by trial and error when it comes to faith. He is willing to follow the wisdom of God.

How else is Abraham open to God? God says, Abraham move to a land I will show you and I will be with you. He moves and never regrets it.

Later, he has a vision and God tells him, "Don't be afraid! I am your shield, and great reward!" Abraham answers as any of his neighbors would have, "But I have no child!" "Come on outside your tent, Abraham. See the stars? Yes, you *will* have descendants and *that* is how many there will be!" That is the point which today's Romans passage refers to when Abraham believes God, and that's all the faith Abraham needs to continue journeying with God.

Later in the story, messengers of God tell of the coming destruction to the inhospitable, violent cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. During their conversation, Abraham has the faith to challenge God to have mercy and spare the righteous in the cities.

One last example is when Abraham believes God wants him to sacrifice his son Isaac, Sarah's only son—the son of God's promise. He lets go of all of his expectations and in the end, the sacrifice is a spiritual one and Isaac lives on.

Is Abraham afraid at times? Yes, and he often acts on his fears. But he learned that his fears were not as substantial as God's promises.

What were God's promises to Abraham?

He will become fruitful and many will call him father. He will be blessed by God. The land in which he sojourned will belong to his descendants.

Abraham is blessed, and his descendants fill the land to this day, both Israelis and Palestinians trace their lineage, physical and spiritual, back to Abraham--Muslims, Jews, and Christians.

Jesus too is a son of Abraham. Right after Peter declares Jesus to be the Messiah, Jesus sets straight what Messiah means. He will be rejected by the religious leaders, suffer, and die. Of course, this does not fit Peter and the disciples' idea of what the Messiah is. Their Messiah will have power and privileges. Suffering and death is for losers and failures—not to mention very counterproductive to a successful health and wealth ministry. Peter thinks that surely Jesus has gotten his spiritual wires crossed.

Before Jesus corrects Peter's mistaken view of Messiah, he makes sure he has the other disciples' attention. "All of you must learn this." If you want to follow me, you must be ready to suffer. You must be open to God's future. This is not about being served, but about serving. This is not about getting everything you want, but about loving instead. Life comes to those who let go. True freedom comes to those who open themselves to God and entrust themselves to God's care as Abraham and Jesus both did.

Jesus knew as Abraham knew that appearances can be very deceiving. What often seems right is wrong, and what fear tells us is wrong sometimes is actually a faithful choice. How do we know the path of faith? Jesus said, "Let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

Indeed, with Abraham and all of the other saints, that is our job—that is our task. Set aside our impulses of fear and our unquenchable desire for comfort and security and follow Jesus into that place of openness to God's love for all people and all of creation.

To what is God leading you, and us, today? Continue with the saints on this Lenten pilgrimage into faith and peace. God is with us. We really have nothing to fear. Your cross is God's gift into freedom. As long as it's a healthy cross, not easy, not pleasant, but a faithful response to God's invitation to love. That cross is your journey into life and peace—hope and joy. It is the gift of God.

Amen.