

Still Faithful After All These Years

Presented by Pastor Scott Walters on 08/11/19

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A seminary friend of mine was a single male who desperately wanted to find someone to marry. I told him that while it's good to put yourself "out there" in order to meet people, I suspect that the woman who he would meet that would eventually become his bride, will happen in a more unplanned, serendipitous way. Who knows? Maybe, instead of him finding the right person; that right person will find my friend.

Regardless of my opinion, he asked me to go along with him to parties and groups in the university of which the School of Theology was a part. We went to a Jazz Concert hosted by the Black Student Association. We went to a Hillel House function. We went to a party at the Newman House – the Roman Catholic group on campus. None of these events were very successful for my friend. I told him that maybe going to these gatherings was "wishful thinking."

The writer to the Letter to the Hebrews didn't know anything about "wishful thinking." He (or she) uses Abraham as an example. You might say that Abraham and Sarah were the first parents of those people who came to be called Jews. But then Christians and Muslims might also claim a spiritual parentage from Abraham and Sarah. That's why those three faiths – Jewish, Christian, and Muslim – are often called the Abrahamic Religions.

There's no evidence that Abraham or Sarah were dissatisfied with his home or his hometown. They were settled in familiar surroundings among familiar faces.

But scripture tells us that God called Abraham – unsettled him until Abraham made the enormous effort to leave the old home and venture into unknown places.

Why did they do that? It's not because Abraham and Sarah wanted a new home or new surroundings. Abraham had some sense of a call that made him raise his head and look to the distant horizon he never expected to visit.

And once Sarah and Abraham moved, God made a promise with them. God promised that they would become the parent of a people – a nation. Now, there's no mistaking that both Abraham and Sarah would have loved to have such a promise come true!

But they knew better! They wanted children all their married years, and had none. They were getting on in years and they had long ago faced facts about the prospects of being able to have children.

But this hope that God offered to Sarah and Abraham was clear enough, and yet it flew in the face of all their experience. They were skeptical.

Hope is neither blind nor wishful thinking.

The Letter to the Hebrews speaks of faith and hope as a kind of pilgrimage. People venture outward, not knowing exactly where they're headed.

So hope is very different from wishful thinking.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn tells of a moment when he was on the verge of giving up all hope. While a political prisoner in the Soviet Union, he was forced to work 12 hours a day on a starvation diet; and he became gravely ill. The doctors, in fact, predicted his death. One afternoon, while shoveling sand under a blazing sun, he simply stopped working. He stopped working even though he knew that the guards would beat him severely, even to death. But he felt he just could not go on. Then he saw another prisoner, a fellow Christian, moving toward him cautiously. With his cane that man quickly drew a cross in the sand and then erased it. In that brief moment, Solzhenitsyn felt all of the hope of the gospel flood through his

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soul. It was a renewal of Christian hope, even though the situation had not changed. It gave him courage to endure that difficult day and the months of imprisonment that followed.

Hope is found beyond ourselves –in the transcendent – in God. And, like faith, hope is finally vindicated because God is faithful. Hope is not dependent on the strength of our own spirit, but in fact functions precisely when our optimism fails, when our emotional strength leaves us broken and vulnerable. Isn't this exactly what Solzhenitsyn discovered?

When he had nothing left in himself, the building block of faith was still there. And that building block awakened within him that second great cornerstone of Christian spirituality: the gift of hope.

This building block of hope opened life up to him again. Faith grounds us in God; and hope opens us to God's future.

John Wesley had it. It is what transformed his ministry. He found it at Aldersgate.

Countless others have had it over the years, and it has made all the difference to their lives. It has given them strength to deal with trouble and inspiration to do extraordinary things.

What is it? It goes all the way back to Abraham. Abraham had it. You know what it is? It is in the text--Faith. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

You see, we are not perfect. We are not in control. We don't have all the answers. We are not better than other people. But we learning like Abraham, that God can be trusted. God can be trusted to give peace in the midst of the storm. God can be trusted to empower you in the midst of trouble. God can be trusted!