

**Strong in Faith**  
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**Romans 4:13-25**

<sup>13</sup>For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. <sup>14</sup>If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. <sup>15</sup>For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

<sup>16</sup>For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, <sup>17</sup>as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”)—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. <sup>18</sup>Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become “the father of many nations,” according to what was said, “So numerous shall your descendants be.” <sup>19</sup>He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. <sup>20</sup>No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, <sup>21</sup>being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. <sup>22</sup>Therefore his faith “was reckoned to him as righteousness.” <sup>23</sup>Now the words, “it was reckoned to him,” were written not for his sake alone, <sup>24</sup>but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, <sup>25</sup>who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

**Mark 8:31-38**

<sup>31</sup>Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. <sup>32</sup>He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. <sup>33</sup>But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

<sup>34</sup>He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup>For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. <sup>36</sup>For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? <sup>37</sup>Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? <sup>38</sup>Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” <sup>9:1</sup>And he said to them, “Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.”

Paul, a missionary to the Gentiles, needed to address God’s promise to Abraham that his descendants would be as many as the stars. God said to Abraham, “I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.”<sup>1</sup> If this promise was made to Abraham and his descendants, how

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 17:7

can the Gentiles, not genetic descendants of Abraham, consider God their God and thus receive salvation through Jesus Christ? Paul says, “For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham.”

Paul continues in his argument explaining how our faith can make us righteous, or right with God, and uses the example of Abraham and Sarah conceiving when both were around 100. He says of Abraham, “Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become ‘the father of many nations,’ according to what was said, ‘So numerous shall your descendants be.’ He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.”

Genesis tells the story a little differently, with Abraham falling on his face laughing at the news that Sarah was to bear a child. But that doesn’t make Paul’s description untrue. Abraham, at seventy-five, left his home and all that was familiar for a new land because God asked him; Abraham was willing to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac, because God asked him. While this last story seems distasteful, the point it was intended to convey is not. Abraham let go of the life he desired, the life with which he was familiar, on more than one occasion, because he had faith in God and God’s plans.

The moral of this story, the story of a man stronger in his faith than in his desire to live life his own way, matches the call Jesus gives to the crowd, including the disciples, including Peter. Jesus openly tells the group gathered that he will suffer and die and rise again. Perhaps this was not how Peter pictured a Messiah working to save the Jews. Perhaps Peter didn’t want to hear that he would lose his friend and teacher and Lord. Whatever the reason, Peter pulls Jesus aside and tells him surely what he says cannot be true. In some way, Peter had in his mind the way the life of his friend, and thus his own life, would look. He was “setting his mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Jesus uses the encounter to teach those gathered that holding onto the lives they want means they will miss out on the life God desires for them. To take up one’s cross is to sacrifice one’s life. For Jesus, and many of the early Christians, this meant giving up one’s last breath AND giving up the life one had planned. Here and now, it is unlikely we will be asked to give up our last breath but we can certainly admit to clinging to lives of our own designs, counting on futures as we envision them, developing expectations for our days which have nothing to do with God. The temptation is not sinful; even Jesus faced it in the garden before he was given up to be crucified. As told in the gospel of Mark, Jesus says, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want,

but what you want.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus let go of the life he desired because he had faith in God and God’s plans. Jesus was a man stronger in his faith than in his desire to live life his own way.

This Ash Wednesday I spoke about the discipline of fasting during Lent. Although not dictated by the Presbyterian Church, many do take up some form of fast, or giving up. I suggested, if you choose to do so, thinking about giving up those things that separate you from God. That suggestion can be reworded with today’s readings in mind: give up those plans or expectations which deny or ignore God’s plan, those which make you seem ashamed of God and God’s Word. Lose life as you know it for Christ’s sake, and for the sake of the gospel, and you will have a new life, and have it abundantly.

Giving up those things that keep you from God in favor of things that give glory to God, as with Abraham, causes your faith to grow stronger. Some of you know that I am going to physical therapy for damage to one of my knees. The goal of my therapy is to make me stronger by making the muscles that support the knee stronger. You know that I can’t just do the prescribed exercises once and be instantly stronger. Every day I repeat the exercises and every week I get new exercises added to the ones I’m already doing.

Strengthening our faith is likewise an ongoing process, and it starts with baby steps. We cannot reasonably expect to decide that one day we will live every action and thought of our lives for God and then it be so. We start one step at a time. We encounter one specific worry and decide to let that one worry go, having faith that God will take care of things somehow and that God will support us all the way to the other side of that worry. Jesus says, “Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?”<sup>3</sup> I **love** this Scripture, in large part because I need this reminder on a daily, even hourly basis. Jesus goes on to say, “Strive first for the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”<sup>4</sup> There they are again: righteousness and putting God first. Strive to be in right relationship with God by putting your trust, your faith, in God’s plans. What you need, not necessarily what you want, but what you need, will be given to you. Loosen your grip so your hands are open to receive.

We face one expectation we have for our future and we loosen our grip and open our hearts to a willingness to see where God is taking us. And then, somewhere down the line, maybe even before we feel we’re ready, we take a leap of faith and we let something else go. What expectation do you have that are of your own making? Is there more than one? I suspect so. Listen for the Holy Spirit to guide you toward an expectation that might not match God’s plans and then let it go. Maybe it’s an expectation to be in the same city or the same home or the same neighborhood for perpetuity. Maybe

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 14:36

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 6:27

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 6:33

it's an expectation for a career path or a relationship or for your children. Let it go if it has nothing to do with the kingdom of God.

This way of living, this way of trying to live abundantly by living toward God, isn't confined to our personal lives. The same can be said for the church. What expectations do we have for First Presbyterian? Are they based in our human hopes for the future or are they based in God's plans for the future? Can we pick one expectation to let go of in order to free us to listen more earnestly to God's plan? This is not easy. There is a reason this giving up is compared to taking up a cross, to sacrificing. Remember, though, Christ's prayer at Gethsemane. We are not alone in any of this. Together, for ourselves, for the church, and for the world, let us pray, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; not what we want, but what you want." Amen.