

Pentecost 3

1 June 2008

Pastor Fred Hedt

“Hoping Against Hope”

Romans 4.18-25

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

The text I would direct you to is today’s second lesson, Romans 4.18-25: “¹⁸Hoping against hope, Abraham believed that he would become “the father of many nations,” according to what God had said, “So numerous shall your descendants be.” ¹⁹He did not weaken in faith...”

Hoping against hope, facing the hopeless situation. I’ve not yet seen the new Indian Jones movie ... but I will! The plot device of that and every other action movie is the “hopeless situation.” Put a hero in a hopeless situation and then see what impossibly implausible way the hero finds to get out of it. Indiana Jones, Superman, Batman, Elektra, Wonder Woman – all of them face again and again the “hopeless situation”...and prevail! Today we call them “action movies”. Back when I was a kid we called them “cliff hangers”. There was a Saturday afternoon children’s matinee at the local theater. One of the features would be a serial – it would end with the hero stuck in a hopeless situation, maybe hanging off a cliff, and you had come back next Saturday to see if the hero survived. Which he always did.

In our 2nd lesson this morning, St. Paul looks back at an OT “cliff hanger”. Abraham is the hero of the story. God has told Abraham that he is the key to the salvation of human race. The human race has fallen into sin. It needs to be rescued. It needs a rescuer. Abraham, God says, will have descendants as countless as the stars. He will become the father of many nations. From one of those nations will come a descendant who will be the Savior. The destiny of the whole human race has funneled down Abraham.

But wait!

Abraham has no children! He’s 100 years old! His wife is 90 years old! There are no descendants! Abraham is in a hopeless situation. ***Tune in next week to see what God is going to do!***

Well, you know what God did. 90 year old Sarah had a baby, and 100 yr. old Abraham became a daddy. Their child was Isaac who was the father of Jacob who became the father of the 12 tribes of Israel. One of those sons was **Judah** who became the ancestor of Jesus of Nazareth. And Jesus became the Savior of the whole human race.

St. Paul tells this story in Chapter 4 of the book of Romans. Romans is one of my favorite books of the Bible. When St. Paul wrote Timothy & Titus he was giving advice to young Pastors. When he wrote Corinthians writing to a very troubled congregation. But in Romans, St. Paul is laying out his theology. This is his understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

“I am not ashamed of this Gospel,” he writes in Chapter 1, “for it is God’s **power** to save everyone who has faith in Jesus Christ.”

In the first 3 chapters Paul lays out the problem: Sin separates us from God and everyone has sinned. Everyone, no exceptions – it is a universal human problem.

Good works, keeping the rules, will not solve our sin problem. It will not make us right in the eyes of God.

The *good news* is that God offers us the righteousness of Christ as a gift of grace. “We believe,” Paul writes in 3.28, “that a person is justified in God’s sight by faith in Christ and not by doing good works.”

Justified by faith in Jesus Christ. That’s the good news! That’s the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We don’t *earn* God’s favor by what we do, we are made right in God’s eyes by faith in Jesus Christ.

That’s Romans 1 through 3. In chapter 4 St. Paul offers an illustration, brings out some hero of faith to illustrate that we are saved by faith and not by obedience to God’s rules. And who does he select? **ABRAHAM**. St. Paul uses *Abraham* to illustrate we are saved by faith and not by works.

Which at first blush seems rather strange. You would think Abraham is all about *obedience*. “Leave your father’s house and go to a strange land,” God says, and Abraham gets up and goes. “Take your only son Isaac and present him to me as a burnt offering,” God says, and Abraham lays his son Isaac on the altar of sacrifice.

You might want to make a case that Abe was right with God by his obedience to God’s commands. But that case withers when you remember the times that Abraham *didn’t* do the right things. There were those two times he watch Sarah march off to a harem because he was afraid to claim her as his wife.

St. Paul puts Abraham forward as an example of the Gospel, of being right with God by faith. And Abraham provides us with a wonderful definition of faith: faith is maintaining hope in a hopeless situation. Faith is believing God is going to do what God says he will do even when it looks like it can’t be done.

“God says I will be the father of many nations. I believe I even when every reasonable expectation is that Sarah and I will have no children.” That is faith.

God offers to us his son Jesus as the source of Resurrection and Life. Faith is hoping against hope. Faith is believing there is resurrection and life in Christ even when there is no tangible evidence to support that.

I’ve seen a number of people die. And I’ve seen a number of them revived – brought back to life on *this* side of death. They would have to die again.

But I’ve *never* seen anyone resurrected, never seen anyone emerge on the other side of death, perfected, never to die again. All I have is God’s testimony that there will be a resurrection. And God’s promise that because Jesus lives, I shall live too.

The fact is we live in pretty hopeless circumstances. We can build nice lives, surround ourselves with pretty things, find ways to be more comfortable, more prosperous. There’s a lot of things for us to enjoy. And people to love and treasure.

It’s all good. But no one lives *forever* in this world.

No one.

We’ve never seen that happen. For all the times we’ve seen people revived, we’ve never seen anyone resurrected. Friday I visited one of our members in the hospital. As I entered the room I was greeted with the words “I’m dying”. Caught off guard my response was “We’re all dying”. The person laughed – “I guess you’re right!”

It’s part of the deal – if you’re born, you’ll die. No one lives *forever* in this world. For all the

times we've seen people revived, we've never seen anyone resurrected.

No one.

Except Christ.

Christ rose from the dead. Christ was not revived – brought back to life on *this* side of death. Christ passed through death and emerged on the other side, perfected, never to die again. And God promises resurrection and life for all who believe in him.

Christ gives us reason to hope against hope. And each one of us is confronted with a choice: I will or will not believe God is going to do what God says he will do even when it looks like it can't be done. I will or will not believe God when he says Jesus is resurrection and Life for all who believe in Him. I will or will not accept the saving hand that Christ holds out to me and empowers me to receive.

In Christ there is reason for hope even when we live in the most hopeless of situations. Maintaining hope in a hopeless situation is faith.

Two weeks ago I flew up to Detroit after Sunday services. My aged dad was in the hospital and it was time to move him from the assisted living where he lived with my mom to a nursing home. I was able to help him make that move before having to come home.

When I told you about moving him into a nursing home many of you said "That must have been difficult."

I don't want to appear to be callous – but it really wasn't. Not at all. My father has gotten frail to the point that my mother can't provide care he needs. She wanted to. And she tried to. But it was really more than she could handle and it was pulling them both down. The best thing for *both* of them was to place my dad in a nursing home.

My hope for my dad is not that he become the first person to live in this world forever. That is not what any of us want. My hope for my dad is Christ.

My dad has been a faithful follower of Christ for his whole life. Mom and dad brought me to Christ – September 12, 1948: I was less than two months old when they presented me for Holy Baptism. My earliest memory is of my dad taking me to Messiah Lutheran Church to enroll me in Sunday School. Taking me, not sending me. And he had me in Sunday School every Sunday while he attended the Adult Bible Class.

My hope is not that he hang on forever in this world getting frailer and sicker. My hope is that in God's good time he move on to that place that even now Christ is preparing for him. And that by the grace of God I hold on to my faith until the day I make that journey, there to be reunite with my dad and all I love who have passed on in faith. There will be a joyous reunion, beyond death and sickness and pain. A joyous forever reunion.

That may be hoping against hope.

But I am betting my life on Christ.