

“O Ye of Fragile Faith”  
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,  
concerning Genesis 12:1-4; Romans 4:13-24  
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,  
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The Apostle Paul tells us we are justified, not by works of righteousness, but by faith. However, flip a few pages past Paul and we find an impassioned counter-argument in the book of James, which states emphatically that faith without works is dead.

I just love biblical dissension, don't you? It is not so much proof that the Bible contradicts itself, and is therefore logically compromised and flawed. Rather, it is evidence that theology was a conversation long before it was a creed. The folks who compiled this cannon we call the Holy Scriptures were not threatened by its diversity of voices and opinions and its motley cast of characters. Instead they believed the Christian community would be enriched by the Bible's variety of writers, genres, and perspectives.

It seems to me God has always spoken in many tongues, with dramatic imagery and creative flare. We are the ones who have tried so hard to make it plain, to reduce God's many languages into one, to beat beauty into uniformity and plowshares into swords. We are the ones who turn God's songs into battles cries, who take different parts of the harmony and force them to be enemies.

Should we take Paul's word for it or James? Is this journey with God about faith in Christ or about deeds of compassion? According to the Bible, the answer is yes.

The primary way the Bible communicates with us is through story, and the multi-dimensional nature of a story makes it notoriously difficult to condense into a singular and indisputable meaning. Interpreting with absolute accuracy is a bit like nailing jell-o to a wall.

You could say this makes the task of preaching rather ludicrous, and you'd be right. But I would add: this also makes the task of preaching fun. There *is no way* to get this right, which used to paralyze a girl like me who really wants straight A's on her report card from God and from all these profound professors in the pew. The way past paralysis into speech—at least, for me—is to remember that the task of preaching is not to be right but to tell a good story that connects us to God and unclogs the soul. To be responsible with the text and ethical with my words and informed in my study—yes, of course. But there is more to a good sermon than appropriate caution. I believe that to stir the heart or to rejuvenate the spirit or to see God and self with fresh eyes, we must be invited into a story that resonates with our humanity and expands our capacity to experience transcendence while embracing our frailty.

So instead of setting up Paul and James in the debate room to let them duke it out before your eyes, instead of spouting off competing Scripture quotes as if this were a Twitter war rather than a house of worship, instead of reducing the ineffable mystery of God's relationship with us to a sound byte or cliché, instead I want to enter a story. Actually, it was the Apostle Paul's idea, not

mine, to tell this story. In fact, the New Testament writers return to this story again and again, and for good reason.

To help us understand faith and works, Paul reminds us about Abraham's story, and whenever Abraham is mentioned, you know that the story is going to be important. After all, Abraham is the father of our faith. He is not only the father of the Christian faith, he is also the father of the Jewish faith and the father of the Muslim faith. Take note: that's a whole lot of fathering. As the song says, "Father Abraham had many sons; many sons had Father Abraham. I am one of them, and so are you, so let's just praise the Lord." Such a happy song. Such a sad and hostile reality that greets the children of Abraham in our world today.

Long before we made enemies of our siblings, the story of our faith began with the call of Abraham, to whom God said, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." Of course, it's difficult to bear children without a mother to do the carrying and the birthing, only in this story, Abraham's wife, Sarah cannot conceive. By the time God promises Abraham he will father a great nation, Abraham is already 75 years old. Imagine five or more decades of infertility, and then imagine God suggests you ought to keep trying. Furthermore, don't stay home and try. God wants you to leave behind everything, go live in an entirely foreign place at the hardy age of seventy-five, and if you're lucky, you'll get pregnant while you're at it.

Whether they were crazy or courageous, it's hard to know, but Abraham and Sarah pack up their belongings and go, with no information about what is to come, save an impossible promise that could never come true. You can see why Abraham and Sarah are commended as people of great faith. The Apostle Paul writes, "Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness."

Only, the story is not quite so simple, and neither is Abraham's faith. In the very same chapter of Genesis in which Abraham and Sarah start out their journey, a famine strikes the land, and so they head to Egypt, only Abraham is worried that it won't work out among the Egyptians, so he concocts a foolproof plan. He claims that his beautiful wife is actually his sister, which allows the Pharaoh to take Sarah into his home as his own, and as a result, the Pharaoh treats Abraham quite well as the brother of his new bride. You have to wonder who would do such a despicable thing to his own wife? We might attribute this grievance to Abraham's youthful ignorance, but he does the exact same thing again in his late nineties, in Genesis chapter 20, this time with King Abimelech. When King Abimelech takes Sarah into his house, believing her to be Abraham's sister, God comes to him in a dream and reveals the truth. The king considers himself a man of integrity, so he literally says to Abraham, "What were you thinking?" Abraham admits he did it because he was afraid.

You might say Abraham's trust in God is finicky at best, and that these men from other nations act more righteous than he. Abraham's faith in foreigners is especially shaky, despite how well they treat him. So while Abraham's journey began with an impressive leap of faith, he still has a lot to learn, and as we can see, he often makes choices based in fear rather than in faith.

And let us not forget that when Sarah starts feeling desperate about the fact that she hasn't been able to conceive after some sixty years of trying, she comes up with the idea that she'll give her maid to Abraham and they will bear a child that way. Abraham agrees and who knows if they think they are being creative and helping God with the plan or whether they are just sick and tired of waiting.

The fact of the matter is, their legendary faith—from which our own faith was born—is not really all that faithful. Abraham and Sarah start out on this remarkably brave journey, but then they get scared, multiple times. They make mistakes; they look for shortcuts. They practice dishonesty and forfeit some of their integrity. In their fear, they hurt one another.

And yet their faith was credited to them as righteousness, and their names were made great, and they became a great nation, a blessing to all.

Abraham and Sarah, I take it, are the parents of our faith, not because they are exemplary, but because they are so much like us. They are parents we can relate to, parents who get our struggle. We don't have to wonder if we're adopted or doubt whether we share their DNA, because the similarities are obvious. We share the same quirks and doubts and compelling fears.

We too have started out, you see, on this remarkably brave journey, but inevitably, we will get scared. We will make mistakes and look for shortcuts. We will practice dishonesty and forfeit some integrity. In our fear, we will hurt one another. But we aren't called people of faith because we are perfect, but because our story is one of perseverance and grace.

Lent is that season of the church year that normalizes our melancholy, our doubt, and our struggle. We are reminded we aren't the only ones, that wandering wilderness and long journey is the birth story of our faith. We are reminded that we aren't struggling because we don't have enough faith. We are struggling because we are human, because we do have faith and the world isn't always kind to those who hope. We are reminded that entering uncharted territory is nothing new; we are not alone, and it is God who calls us beyond the familiar into the wild and into the foreign. We struggle and suffer, not because we're doing it all wrong, but because we care so deeply about the world, our families, and the earth. If we didn't care, life would be far less painful, just like if Jesus didn't care, there wouldn't have been a cross to bear.

Is it possible that your pain isn't a sign of your weakness but of your goodness? That your doubt isn't a sign of failure, but evidence that you are courageous enough to venture into lands where faith is tested?

Is faith really necessary? Are the faithful allowed to doubt? According to the Bible, the answer is yes. Are we children of Abraham because we are faithful or because we struggle with faith? The answer is yes. Is it our works that reveal the sincerity of our faith? Is there forgiveness when our deeds do not match our beliefs? The answer is yes.

If you toil, if you question, if you ever try to do God's work for him, if you worry, if you fear, fear not. You are undoubtedly Abraham's child. The resemblance can be seen from a mile away. You and I belong to this story, and even when we falter, the story carries us. Grace carries us.

Time and time again in this journey of faith, we will find ourselves in unfamiliar land that we do not know how to navigate. Time and time again we will feel fear. We will want to stay home. We will not want to hear the call to birth yet another blessing into this world of woe and nurture it to vibrancy. We will feel too old or too tired or too barren or too discouraged. We will rack our brains for solutions to the present challenges, and even our best ideas may fail. We will look up at the stars and feel God's promise is utterly beyond reach.

And God in heaven will look down on our frailty and say, "Oh good, here is someone I can work with."

O ye of fragile faith, thank God your faith is not overly-confident, arrogant, domineering, or averse to learning. O ye of fragile faith, thank God your eyes are open wide, that your faith isn't blind. O ye of fragile faith, thank goodness the reality of suffering gets to you. Thank God you are not oblivious to pain, to incongruity, and to questions. Thank God you are vulnerable. O ye of fragile faith, blessed are you for your authentic doubt, your honesty with your self, your refusal to self-medicate with easy but false answers will lead you, one day, to a land of milk and honey. O ye of fragile faith, thank goodness you are human. It is such a relief to know you are normal. O ye of fragile faith, did you know you are so loved by God? If you haven't figured that out yet, join the family. The rest of us are still learning too. O ye of fragile faith, your greatness does not come from your ability to hold onto to God. You are great because God holds onto you. O ye of fragile faith, there is no shame in your need to rest and no sin in your desire for assurance. The fragility of your faith makes you pliable, makes you teachable, actually makes you resilient, though you may not realize it.

There is a Thomas Merton prayer we've used around here many times, and it might as well be straight from the mouths of Abraham and Sarah. I repeat this prayer in closing, as I suspect we can relate:

"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."