

Practicing Radical Trust: Standing on the Promises of God

A sermon preached in Christ Church, Sheridan, MT, by the Rev. Bruce McNab
2nd Sunday in Lent, Year C. February 24, 2013. (Text: Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18)

Do you know what the business world is built on? *Faith!* The world of commerce and industry, the marketplace on which American prosperity depends, operates on a foundation of *promises*. We call these promises “contracts.” For example: Let’s say the Dow Chemical Company enters into a contract to provide so many tons of polyethylene resin from its plant in Midland, Michigan, to the Nexus Plastics Company in Hawthorne, New Jersey, a manufacturer of plastic bags. Dow Chem promises to ship the resin to Nexus Plastic’s factory by a certain date. That’s a *promise*. Nexus has *faith* that Dow is going to keep its promise, and on the basis of that faith, they agree to pay Dow Chemical an agreed upon sum of money—maybe so much up front, and so much more when the contract is fulfilled.

The business world would come to a stop if companies quit *believing* in one another, if they stopped having faith that the promises they make can be relied on. Of course, business contracts have penalty clauses for non-performance or default, because that *does* sometimes happen. Lawyers and judges are busy in courtrooms all over America thrashing out questions of whether promises—contracts—have been adequately fulfilled or not. But if a company habitually makes promises it can’t or won’t keep, that company won’t stay in business long.

Promises and trust make civilization possible – not just in commerce, but in every dimension of human life, including the dimension of the spirit. The promises of God are the foundation of our faith as Christians. That’s part of the reason why we call ourselves “believers.”

The first book of the Bible offers us the story of Abraham. Abraham is a “hero of faith” for Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. We call him that because he had faith that God would keep his promises, and he kept on trusting God—even through circumstances that would have made most of *us* give up on God. Let’s recap the story of Abraham. Abraham was a peaceful city-fellow who lived in Ur, whose ruins are to be found—somewhat worse for wear—in the modern country we call Iraq. When Abraham was about 75 years old, childless and very rich, he had an encounter with God. God came to him and said, “I want you to leave this place and your fathers’ house and go to a land that I will show you. I’m going to give you that new land to be your inheritance, and I will make you the father of a multitude. I will bless you to be a blessing, and by you all the peoples of the earth shall bless themselves.”

Abraham responded to this dream or vision or voice (whatever it was) by doing just what God had commanded. Even though he was a city-fellow, he bought some camels, packed up, took his wife and his orphaned nephew and all his possessions, and went away into the wilderness to spend the rest of his life as a wandering nomad—trusting that the God who had spoken to him would keep his promise to give him both a homeland and a family.

By the way, the fact that Abraham was 75 when he left his home and went off into the wilderness in response to God’s call tells us that *nobody* is too old to make a new beginning of faith!

The part of Genesis we read today describes a time, more than a decade later, after Abraham had finally arrived in the Promised Land. Abraham now is even richer than before, with flocks and slaves and land—but he still has no heir, no son to inherit all his possessions. God appears to him again and renews his

promise—making it this time in the form of a *covenant*, the most awesome kind of promise possible in that culture.

God solemnly promises, once more, that Abraham and his wife will not only have a son but that their descendants will eventually be more numerous than the stars in the sky. After that promise there's a single sentence upon which the entire story of Abraham, the history of Israel, and the faith of Christians depends. It says: He believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness. Abraham *believed God*, and kept on believing God and trusting God to keep his promise—even though it was fifteen more years before the child was born.

Abraham *believed God*; and the Almighty chose to regard Abraham's trust in his promise "as righteousness" even though Abraham was, in fact, a very imperfect man. God chose to treat Abraham as his intimate friend because he had tested him and learned that Abraham was going to believe God's promises through thick and thin. God was faithful to Abraham, and Abraham was faithful to God. This is what makes him a hero of faith for us.

The faith of Abraham wasn't based on the kind of information a manufacturer might need in order to decide whether or not to make a deal to buy raw materials from a previously unknown supplier. Abraham's faith in God wasn't based on any "information" at all. It was a decision based on an *encounter* with God and a long *relationship* that grew out of that encounter—a relationship that's different only in degree, not in kind, from the trust relationships we ourselves hold most dear in *our* lives. We trust our wife or husband or best friends, *not* because we have *information* about them, but because we *know* them, and because we know them, we have confidence that their love for us is the real thing.

Believing is not mainly about doctrine, not about agreeing with creeds or catechisms. These have their place, to be sure. But the believing that *saves* us, the believing that puts us right with God and gives us strength to go forward day after day, is *radical trust* in the One who loves us absolutely and has proven it by his sharing our life and dying our death. God doesn't invite us into a relationship with him and then drop us. We might do something like that, but God won't. We can be fickle, faithless friends. But God is *always* faithful.

When Abraham, long ago in Mesopotamia had a dream and heard the Voice of God telling him to go to a distant land that God would show him, he decided to go. He could have gotten up the next morning and said, "What a crazy dream that was!"—But he didn't. He took the risk; he trusted the Word he had heard and went off into the wilderness. He *believed* God! God told him he not only would have a son, but descendants more numerous than the stars. And he believed God—even though he was a hundred years old and his wife nearly so. Abraham was a morally imperfect man. He was flawed, as we are flawed. But *he believed God* and God counted the fact that Abraham believed him as being even *better* than moral virtues.

One of my favorite Bible verses is: "*All things are possible to one who believes.*" That's not about believing certain points of doctrine. It's about trusting the faithfulness of Jesus Christ and obeying his voice.

He has called us to take his hand and walk with him into a future that may in many ways be dim, frightening and uncertain, except for one thing: whatever comes our way, we'll be walking into it with Jesus. We can have no more faithful companion.