

## Genesis 15:1-6

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.' But Abram said, 'O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?' And Abram said, 'You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.' But the word of the Lord came to him, 'This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.' He brought him outside and said, 'Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

## Mark 9:14-29

When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. He asked them, 'What are you arguing about with them?' Someone from the crowd answered him, 'Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.' He answered them, 'You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.' And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it threw the boy into convulsions, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the father, 'How long has this been happening to him?' And he said, 'From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.' Jesus said to him, 'If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.' Immediately the father of the child cried out, 'I believe; help my unbelief!' When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, 'You spirit that keep this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!' After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, 'He is dead.' But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, 'Why could we not cast it out?' He said to them, 'This kind can come out only through prayer.'

## **BELIEVE EVEN WHEN...**

We're in the middle of our Easter worship series, called "Rise Up," and we've explored our understanding of such concepts as salvation, suffering, sacrifice. Today we'll talk about belief, and unfortunately the notion of BELIEF has been too often diminished into set of theological statements... like the Apostle's Creed, which we say together on occasion; we believe in God the Father almighty, etc. These are fine, but they don't really inspire us very much, do they? They don't really say anything about the struggles we face. In today's Old Testament and Gospel lessons, we find stories of men who are challenged to believe not in a creed but in God's ability to do something for them personally.

Abraham needed an heir and this poor man needed someone to heal his son, and they both struggled to TRUST God. God had twice promised Abram that he would be the Father of nations, but Abram and his wife were old, and it just didn't seem that it could happen. In the story from Mark's gospel, a boy's father had brought his son to Jesus for healing, and Jesus' disciples, who had been given full authority by Jesus cast out evil spirits, couldn't quite do it. There were a lot of people going around saying that Jesus

was a fraud, so this man had placed a lot of hope in Jesus, only to be let down. So the *belief* that these lessons are talking about is more a matter of *trust* than it is a matter of comprehension of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Both men were feeling let down, and both chose to trust in God anyway.

And trust is an issue of *relationship*; if you haven't gleaned this yet from our worship series, all of these core concepts of our Christian faith – salvation, suffering, and sacrifice – are about a relationship with God, a relationship that has been horribly damaged by the actions of the first humans, but a relationship that is restored for those who truly *believe in* Jesus Christ. Salvation has already come to us; our suffering is not without purpose or benefit because our lives are already in God's hands; Christ's sacrifice on our behalf was God's perfect way of restoring our relationship. And belief is our way of saying "amen" to all of that. It's our way of saying:

"I trust you, Lord. However bad things look, however impossible things seem, I trust that you're going to fix what's broken, restore what is lost, raise what has died."

The greatest challenge to belief is unanswered prayers or broken promises. Reading stories like those in today's lessons doesn't do a whole lot to strengthen our faith; in fact they can sometimes hurt our belief. If I am a Christian praying for healing of myself or someone I love, and that healing doesn't occur, I may stop believing that God even exists, or I may blame my own "lack of faith" or I may have doubts about the truth of what's written in the Bible thinking that these are fairy tales, that they didn't really happen or I may restrict my belief to a God whose main concern is the afterlife, a God who "tests" us in this life, allowing all sorts of horrible things to happen, but when it's all over we go to heaven and all is well again and forever. The bottom line is that when we believe that God can and will do something and it doesn't happen, we feel a disconnect.

It would be nice to get inside the heads of Abraham or the father of this poor boy in our Gospel lesson to figure out if there was anything different about their 'belief' in God that 'trips the switch' and causes a miracle to transpire, and I don't think anyone has the answer to that.

But the question that intrigues me even more than that is, "Why do some people go on believing when miracles don't happen while others don't?" An even more interesting question is, "Why do those who seem to have fewer prayers answered believe more than those whose prayers so often **are** answered?" Why are churches growing in the poorest nations on earth while those in the most developed countries, where life expectancy is highest, where access to healthcare is greatest, are struggling? Why do people in nations where people die from completely preventable diseases profess a stronger faith than people do in nations where medical miracles occur every day?

First of all, it's because they are poor, and they can't rely upon their own abilities to physically survive. They need food and clothing and medicine, and their government is unable to provide for their basic needs. They have no one BUT God to depend on. So even when they are suffering more in body, they find that their only answer is God. In wealthy nations, if we don't have food on our table or money in our pockets, our first thought goes to applying for a job, or visiting a food bank or even heading to a soup kitchen – while we may not have the best diet in the world, Americans can usually find food. While we may not have the best housing in the world, Americans can usually find shelter, and while we may not receive treatment from the best doctors in the world we can usually find medical help.

Americans are impoverished in a different way; we are impoverished *spiritually* because we have abundance around us. We are the ones who Jesus and the Old Testament prophets warn about neglecting the needs around us. We credit ourselves with our charity, but we don't give as much as we

could of our time, talents, or money to alleviate the suffering around us. And because we credit ourselves, we make ourselves, in our own minds at least, like God. And when you're like God you don't need God. It's no accident that the good news Jesus proclaims begins with a commandment to repent. We Americans don't like to repent; we get defensive and say we have nothing to repent for – we're Americans after all. And if we're not motivated to repent, we're certainly not motivated to find God. Our faith rests in ourselves because we have shown ourselves to be so good at taking care of our own needs. We even compare ourselves materially to the rest of the world and compliment ourselves on our wealth, and now we're so wealthy that even many of our poorest people suffer from obesity. The greatest challenges we face to our social order are not material poverty, lack of clean water, clothing, food, water, or housing; our greatest challenges are drug addiction, depression and suicide, alcoholism, sex addiction, and, in essence, nihilism, a loss of a sense of purpose or meaning in life. All the things we chase after to satisfy our hunger only leave us feeling empty. This is why I believe that the Church will grow in America if it can keep its focus on Jesus Christ and his message of repentance and love, not on personal piety and self-righteousness. We have a deep spiritual need that can be filled by nothing but God, and eventually people come to recognize their own spiritual poverty.

It is when we lose faith in ourselves or our fellow human beings that we start to develop faith in God. When we can't come up with a solution, when money and position and authority and personal pleasure no longer satisfy our hungering souls, that we turn to God and begin to trust in him rather than in ourselves. So often I've had people who have hardly ever prayed or come to church ask me to pray for them; because up until that time things had been going quite well for them, but now something has happened, and sadly they feel so distant from God that they think only a pastor or priest can correct the problem – and shame on the church for allowing anyone to think that some intermediary is necessary. Our lessons show God responding directly to the needs of the people, to Abram and to the father of the boy possessed by a destructive spirit. God is there whenever you call upon him, and he does hear us when we call upon him.

The challenge is and always has been keeping our trust in God even when things don't go the way we want them to go. The good news is that belief is something God has instilled in us; what else could explain the fact that those who struggle the most are also the ones who believe the most? My challenge to you then is to persist in prayer and in belief even when things don't turn out the way you want them to in the timeframe you want them to. If you persist in prayer, even unanswered prayer, you will find peace, and you will grow in faith. Trust and obey, as the hymn says. And may you be blessed as your faith grows.