

Text: Romans 4:18-25

Theme: A Lesson from the History of Abraham

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Preacher: Rolfe Westendorf, St. John's, Montello

Have you ever been to Rome? I have. During my days as a student at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, one of my friends talked me into spending nine months in Europe, studying at the Seminary in Oberursel, and traveling around the continent to see what we could see.

So we spent about a week in Rome, wandering through the city, walking through the magnificent cathedrals and examining the ruins of a civilization that once ruled much of the world during New Testament times.

The events that took place during the days of the Roman Empire had a significant impact upon our lives today, the most obvious being our alphabet, but also our system of government had its origins in the events that happened two thousand years ago in the city of Rome. As I struggled through the required history courses in high school and college, I understood only dimly that these events should be known, not only because they happened, but also because of the impact that Roman history has had upon life as we know it today. The ruins that are now visited by tourists were once a normal part of a very busy city that was developing ideas and principles that are still in use today. We are still under the influence of events that took place in ancient Rome, whether we realize it or not.

The Roman Empire has also influenced us spiritually. As Roman legions were conquering the world, the Ruler of the universe was walking the streets of Palestine conquering sin and death for our salvation. It was a governor appointed by Rome who ordered the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Roman soldiers vainly guarded Jesus' tomb on Easter morning. Roman armies kept the peace that made it possible for St. Paul and other apostles to spread the good news of salvation to our spiritual ancestors, who eventually brought the faith to the North American continent.

The history of Rome reports to us the thoughts and deeds of real people who actually lived their lives two thousand years ago, and those real events had a real impact upon our lives as American Christians today.

The same can be said of Bible history as well. There were myths that were told and maybe believed in ancient Rome, but the facts of Roman history are not the product of human imagination. Other myths have been told and retold throughout the world, but the events reported in the Bible were not invented by ancient priests and prophets who were trying to win support for their teachings. Our faith is based on events that happened long before Rome became a world power, as well as the events that occurred while Augustus was emperor in Rome, from the creation of the world to the ascension of Jesus into heaven.

And so it is entirely legitimate that St. Paul turns to events that were recorded by Moses in the book of Genesis to demonstrate the truth that our salvation comes to us, not through our works, but through faith and faith alone. Just as events in ancient Rome influence our lives today, so the experiences of Abraham, who lived two thousand years before the Roman Empire, also influence our lives today, especially when it comes to our relationship with God.

Genesis tells us how Abraham was chosen by God to be the father of a people he would call his own his, the nation of Israel. Abraham was living with his father Terah in Ur of the Chaldees in that part of the world that is now apart of Iraq. But God told him to go to a land that he would show him, and God promised that he would give this land to Abraham's descendants. Abraham believed God's promise. He packed up his family and moved with his wife Sarah and nephew Lot, first to Haran but then to the land we now call Palestine. He lived as a foreigner in the land. None of it belonged to him. But he had God's word for it that one day his descendants would possess the land, a promise that was finally fulfilled when Joshua led the Israelites across the Jordan some five hundred years later.

But God had made Abraham another, more significant promise, that his descendants would become as numerous as the stars in the sky, and that the whole world would be blessed through one of those descendants, a promise that was fulfilled two thousand years later when Jesus Christ paid on the cross for the sins of the world.

Abraham did not live to see the fulfillment of either promise. But he had complete faith that God would do as he had promised. The things that God had promised were as real to him as the things that had happened the day before. Abraham believed God's promise.

His faith was sorely challenged. Years went by and Abraham and Sarah remained childless. At the age of one hundred, he was still in vigorous good health, but after many years of trying, Sarah had not conceived. All the evidence indicated that Sarah was barren and would remain that way.

In his weakness, Abraham began to interpret God's promise to suit reality. If God was not going to give him children through Sarah, maybe he meant to make Abraham a father through Sarah's servant, Hagar. At the suggestion of his wife, Abraham slept with Hagar and she bore him a son.

But God did not intend to bless Abraham with descendants through an act of adultery. God renewed his promise. Although Abraham was a hundred years old, and his wife was ninety, Sarah would conceive and give birth to a son. In spite of all the evidence to the contrary, Abraham believed God's promise. Then Moses adds the significant words, "and it was credited to him as righteousness."

Right there in the Book of Genesis God explains how he granted forgiveness and salvation to Abraham and all the Old Testament believers, and to New Testament believers as well.

Abraham was born sinful like all the offspring of Adam and Eve. Old Testament history gives us examples of the sinful nature in action. Besides his adultery with Hagar, Abraham twice told the lie that Sarah was not his wife, but his sister, because he feared that foreign kings would kill him to take possession of his wife. He did not trust God to protect him and lied in order to protect himself.

In some ways Abraham was a hero of faith. At other times he was a weak and sinful human being who deserved God's punishment rather than his blessing. And yet Abraham possessed a righteousness that was not of his own making. God granted to him a sinlessness he did not earn by his behavior. When Abraham believed God's promise, God gave him credit for a righteousness he did not earn.

And who earned that righteousness for him? Jesus did that, when he paid for the sins of the world on the cross. Of course, that payment was not made for another twenty centuries. But God knows the future as well as the past. When God says that a thing will be done, it is as good as done. Therefore God gave Abraham credit for righteousness that Jesus would earn by his perfect life and his innocent death. "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."

That was, of course, tremendously significant for Abraham. The righteousness that God granted to him would make him eligible for heaven. All the sins he had committed during his life could not be charged against him on Judgment Day, because his guilt was covered with the robe of righteousness that Jesus had earned for him.

But why is that significant for us? This bit of Old Testament history took place four thousand years before we were born. How can that history make a difference for us today?

We like to get credit for the good things we have done. We feel good when people praise our accomplishments. We feel mistreated when our work goes unnoticed. That also applies to God's opinion of our behavior. If we have done something well, we feel that God should reward us for that. And this natural tendency has worked its way into all the religions of the world, except for pure Christianity. In many different ways these religions teach that God will bless you if you do good, and that he will punish you if you do wrong. But then the standards of right and wrong are manipulated so that anyone who makes the prescribed effort can do enough to satisfy God's demands.

This religion of earning God's favor with good works has worked its way into many churches that call themselves Christian. The Roman Catholics teach that you will be punished in a place called purgatory if you do not do enough good to make up for the sins you have committed. Even churches that teach salvation by grace demand that you must decide to accept Jesus as your Savior, so that your decision becomes the one good work that you must do to earn salvation.

But God doesn't work that way. The Bible teaches a means of salvation that requires nothing on the part of the sinner. The Bible teaches that Jesus did it all for us, leaving nothing for us to contribute. In fact, it teaches that we are totally unable to contribute, because we are dead in our

sins and unable to lift a finger in service to God. Even our faith is not our own doing, but the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

St. Paul was very familiar with the idea that we can earn our own salvation. As a Pharisee he was completely convinced that he was doing what he needed to do to earn a place in heaven. He knew how easy it was for people to trust in themselves for their own salvation. He knew how people would argue that their good works would get them to heaven.

Abraham was recognized as a man who was very close to God, a man who earned God's favor by his deeds, his obedience to God's commands, his willingness to sacrifice his son, his compassionate prayer for the people of Sodom. Surely Abraham had earned a place in heaven.

That's why St. Paul needed to demonstrate that even Abraham did not earn his righteousness before God. For the Bible says that Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. It was faith, not works, that made Abraham acceptable to God. Listen to these words from Romans, chapter 4:

“If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about - but not before God. What does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’

“Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.

“Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him ‘So shall your offspring be.’ Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead - since he was about one hundred years old - and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why ‘it was credited to him as righteousness.’ The words, ‘it was credited to him’ were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness - for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification”

The history of the past influences our life today, whether the history of ancient Rome or the history of Abraham. Nothing has changed in four thousand years. Just as Abraham was credited with righteousness on the basis of his faith, so we also receive credit for Jesus' righteousness when we believe that he was delivered over to death because of our sins, and raised to life because our sins had been paid for. We are not saved because of our works. Rather it is through faith that we receive salvation. May God the Holy Spirit keep us strong in that faith, that Jesus paid for our sins and made us good enough for heaven.

Dear heavenly Father,

Thank you for the promises you have made to us in the Holy Scripture. Thank you for enabling us to believe those promises, as Abraham believed. Keep us strong in that faith, that we may receive the blessing of those promises. In Jesus' name we ask it. Amen.