

SUNDAY, MAY 30, 2010

Sunday, May 30, 2010: Faith Confirmed

Faith Confirmed
Genesis 15: 1 – 21

I. Introduction.

We participated in the ordinance of baptism this morning. Only one person was baptized, but we all participated. We participated as witnesses, as Tayler gave a public profession of her faith in Jesus. We participated as worshippers, as we saw a picture of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. We participated as a church body, by committing ourselves to pray for Tayler as her new faith in Jesus grows. We also participated in the form of reminiscence, because Tayler's baptism reminds us of the day when we were baptized.

There are some very important things Baptist Christians believe about baptism. First, Baptists believe baptism is reserved for believers only. This is why we do not baptize infants. The New Testament examples of baptism demonstrate adult men and women being baptized after they have professed their faith in Jesus.

Second, Baptists practice baptism by immersion. We do not sprinkle or pour water over a person's head. We insist on placing the new believer completely under water. The reason we practice baptism by immersion is very closely related to my third point...Baptism is symbolic.

We do not fill our baptistery with "Holy Water." No. We fill the baptistery with Lufkin water. It is plain. It is ordinary. It contains no power to wash away sins. The water of baptism is symbolic and tells a story. On one hand, it is the story of Jesus. Jesus died, was buried, and rose again from the grave. On the other hand, it tells our story. I was once a dead man—dead in my sins. I had no forgiveness and no hope. But, once I gave my life to Jesus in faith...The old man was dead and buried. Then, I experienced the resurrection of Jesus in my own life. My old self was dead and buried. My new self was raised to a new life...A new life that is made possible through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Can you remember your own baptism this morning? Perhaps you were baptized right here in this church. Some of you were baptized in this church, but it wasn't in this sanctuary. Some of you may have been baptized in a lake or a creek.

Do you remember the pastor who baptized you? For some of you, I was that pastor. Others were baptized by former pastors from this church or even a pastor in another city or state. What do you remember about the day after your baptism? Was there a giant rainbow in the sky? Did a golden halo appear above your head, so that everyone you met commented about how "saintly" you look? Or, did you have to struggle with living out your new faith in the real world of sin and temptation?

The reality of baptism is that this is not the end of our faith. This is the beginning. And, as the beginning, baptism is also the beginning of a struggle. There are things that we want to do but know those things are wrong and sinful. There are temptations to live like the rest of the world—or to live like we used to live. And, there is the desire to follow Jesus—to live according to his example

and to live a life that is pleasing in God's eyes.

In some ways, our story today from the life of Abram is a lot like the day after our baptism. Genesis 15 is not the beginning of Abram's faith—it is close to the beginning, but his faith actually began in Genesis 12. And, even at such an early point in his faith journey, Abram is beginning to question God and to wonder about God's promises. Abram is beginning to think that God is not going to keep his promise. So, God reminds Abram that an important part of faith is waiting on God's timing.

Read Genesis 15: 1 – 21.

The end of this story is very strange. God told Abram to select 5 animals and to cut them in halves. We sort of expect God to ask Abram to burn these animals as a sacrifice...But, that is not what happened. Instead, Abram placed the animal halves on the ground and separated the halves so there was space between the halves. Then, Abram stayed awake all night long shoos the scavenging birds away from the dead carcasses.

In the darkest part of the night, Abram had a vision. A smoking pot of fire and a torch appeared and moved in between the animal halves. Since smoke and fire are symbols for God, we believe that Abram's vision is of God's coming to earth in order to walk between the animal halves. Perhaps Abram's vision is a ceremony to seal a covenant between two parties. There is an allusion to such a ceremony in **Jeremiah 34: 18, "(God said) The men who have violated my covenant and have not fulfilled the terms of the covenant they made before me, I will treat like the calf they cut in two and then walked between its pieces."**

The person who walks in between the animal halves has committed himself to uphold his covenant promises. If he does not uphold his promise, he will be cut in two just like the animals.

The remarkable thing about Abram's vision is the fact that God is the one who walked in between the animal halves. On one hand, this is problematic. How can anyone hold God accountable to keep his promises? How can anyone threaten to cut God in two? On the other hand, this is a great relief to Abram. The covenant does not depend on Abram and his faithfulness to God. The covenant promises are God's promises to bring about. The burden of fulfilling the promises is off Abram's shoulders. The pressure is off of Abram, and the pressure is on God. God can handle the pressure.

Since this story is not the beginning of Abram's faith, it is best understood as a confirmation of Abram's faith. Actually, it is confirmation that the Object of Abram's faith can and should be trusted. God is faithful to Abram in the present...God will always be faithful to Abram in the future.

II. Remember Your Beginning.

We can find a simple structure in this Scripture. God speaks to Abram. Abram complains to God. God is silent for a moment, so Abram complains a second time. God speaks a second time. Abram complains a third time. Does your prayer life sound like this sometimes?

The words God spoke to Abram in verse one contain two great promises. God promised to be two things in Abram's life. God would be his shield of protection, and God would be Abram's great reward. All that worldly wealth would pale in comparison to the great reward God had in mind.

Abram would be God's man. They would have an exclusive relationship in which God would provide for all Abram's needs and protect him from all evil. God would give him his very presence.

Notice how Abram responds to God's word... **"But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus? And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir (Genesis 15: 2 – 3)."**

I believe there is a pause in between verses 2 and 3. Abram expected an immediate answer from God and an immediate result to God's promise. After all, God had promised to give Abram and Sarai a child in their old age. It didn't happen as quickly as Abram had expected. He wanted an answer. He wanted a child. He wanted God to fulfill God's own promise sooner rather than later...So, Abram kept talking. He didn't say anything new. He just repeated himself, as if God had not heard his first complaint.

God's answer was a reminder of the original promise. Just as Abram didn't say anything new...God didn't say anything new. "You will have a heir, a son coming from your own body."

This should remind us of our own baptism—at least it should remind us of the day when we first became Christians. Do you remember your conversion? Do you remember the day when you first trusted your life into Jesus' hands? Why did you become a Christian?

For most of us, we placed faith in Jesus, because we realized that we are sinners. We have a sin problem that separates us from God. We have a problem that we cannot solve. Only God can solve our sin problem. God took the initiative. He sent his only Son, Jesus, to live an exemplary life...to die a sacrificial death...and to rise again in victorious resurrection.

We believed in Jesus, because God promised us two things. Forgiveness for our sins. An eternal life that begins here on earth and continues in Heaven after life on earth is complete.

Any time we have complaints with God, he will remind us of the promises he made to us at the beginning of our life of faith. Salvation and life. God never promised to make us wealthy. God never promised to take away all our suffering and pain. God promised that he would forgive us our sins and give us a new life. This new life is empowered by the abiding presence of God. God's presence will sustain us through whatever pain and struggles we face.

III. Trust God's Word.

Abram had to learn to trust God's word over all other circumstances. For example, Abram's circumstances told him that he was too old to become a father, and Sarai was too old to become a mother. Abram's circumstances told him that this land was inhabited by the Canaanites, Hittites, Jebusites and a host of other "ites."

We don't know what Abram had planned to do about the people living in the land God promised him. But, the Bible does tell us that Abram had already started making contingency plans for an heir. Abram had selected a slave named Eliezer to be his heir apparent. If God never fulfilled his promise, Abram had a plan. Think about how silly that sounds...If God never fulfilled his promise...

Do you have contingency plans? Contingency plans can be a good thing when it comes to business and retirement plans. Don't put all your eggs in one basket. Put systems and people in place in your

business life. Diversify your retirement portfolio. But, do not make contingency plans in your spiritual life. A spiritual contingency plan is nothing short of a compromise with the world. God does not want you to compromise with the world. God wants you to place all your faith, hope and love in his word and his promises to you.

But the interesting thing is that you have to hear God's word before you can trust God's word. It seems in verse one and following that Abram had an audible conversation with God. Verses 17 and following describe how God spoke to Abram in a vision, or a dream. Perhaps we should wait for either an audible voice or a vision from God...

But we don't have to wait for an audible voice. God has given us the Bible as his word. When we open the Bible, God speaks to us. When we leave our Bibles closed, God remains silent...

This is one of the reasons why church is important. Every time we gather in this sanctuary, we will read the Bible and hear God speak to us.

This is why it is important for you and your families to be involved in a Sunday School class. Every time we gather in Sunday School, we read the Bible and hear God speak to us.

This is why it is important to read your Bible daily as a part of your spiritual growth. God speaks through his word. Of course, there are times when we read the Bible and we can't figure out what God is saying. We should not read the Bible like we read any other book—a novel, a biography, a history book... We should read the Bible prayerfully. A very simple way to do this is to read a short passage of Scripture and pray, "God, what are you saying to me through this Scripture?" Then, Sit...Listen...Wait...Be Still and God will show you.

IV. Righteousness Is a Gift from God.

Verse six is perhaps the most important verse from this biblical story: "**Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.**"

I can find two reasons why Abram believed God. First, God reminded Abram of the beginning of his faith. In the beginning, Abram took God at his word. He trusted in the word of God more than the circumstances of his life. Second, God gave Abram a sign—look at the stars in the sky.

This was not a new sign. The stars had always been there. Abram had probably never taken notice of the stars before, but they were always there. The stars didn't do anything unusual that night. They simply occupied their places in the sky.

This was a sign, because it reminded Abram that God is the creator of everything he can see. God is the creator of things Abram cannot see. God is the creator of things that are too great for Abram to count.

Then, we have a play on words. Abram could not COUNT the stars. But God COUNTED Abram righteous. Abram could not make himself righteous before God. Only God can make a person righteous.

V. Conclusion.

God gave Abram “right standing” before God. It doesn’t mean that Abram was perfect. It doesn’t mean that Abram would never commit sins against God. It means that God changed his status.

If you and I will go back to our original commitment to God, we will discover the same thing. Salvation, Forgiveness of Sins, Eternal Life, the Provision and Protection of God...This is a gift. Trust God’s promises more than your circumstances.