

“MARGINALIZING” OUR FAITH

Sermon, March 10, 2019

The First Sunday in Lent

Texts: Genesis 12:1-9; Luke 4:1-13

“Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you, and you will be a blessing.” That, in essence, was God’s directive to Abram.¹ Our Old Testament text this morning (subtitled “God’s Call to Abram”) is pretty straightforward; it tells us God said “Go!” and Abram *went*. There is no mention of lingering, no mention of hesitation, no mention of bargaining, no mention of Abram’s weighing other options. God said “Go!” and Abram *went* ... along with his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot and all their people and possessions ... from Haran to Canaan, a distance of some six hundred miles. Now I’m sure it wasn’t all that simple or immediate for Abram to comply; all of this certainly took some time and much planning ... conscientious people just do not up and leave a community and a home and country, places where they have roots and responsibilities and commitments, just like that! When I relocated here over 22 years ago, I moved only three hundred miles with “all” my people ... all three and a half of them (*Hannah was still in the womb*)... and even with all the conveniences Abram did not enjoy, such as modern transportation, instant communications, hotels and restaurants along the way, Mayflower moving trucks and paved interstates, it was a lo-o-ong process which took very much planning. This section of the Bible is notoriously short on such details, but it doesn’t mean those innumerable necessary details involved in making such a relocation didn’t take place.

The Bible wants to emphasize a basic and crucial point ... the point being that for Abram, his faith was no static thing! (*Not to be confused with static cling, which just works to make things stay stuck where they are; but that’s another sermon.*) Abram’s faith was dynamic, active and all about *doing* what God called him to do when God called him to do it; Abram’s faith was about obeying the directives of God so, among other things, he could **be a blessing** to others! By the way, when God says to Abram, “... and you will be a blessing to others,” that might be taken as a promise AND it might be taken as part of the divine imperative, as much as the divine directive to “*Leave your country.*” In other words, “*Where I am sending you, do your best to be a blessing, not a burden, to others ... go out of your way to be a blessing to people in My name as you go and do what I’ve called you to do.*” I believe God calls and even commands all His people to proactively work to be a blessing to others; I also believe we best do that when we put our faith to work and obey what God directs us to do. When we put our faith to work, when we obey God ... more often than not, we wind up being a real blessing to others as well as to ourselves. Conversely, when we don’t put our faith to work, when we aren’t obedient to God, we wind up being not much a blessing to anyone, including ourselves.

In the New Testament (*Romans 4, mainly*), Paul talks about Abraham being “justified” by faith. We tend to think of this word “justified” in somewhat legal terms, but in its simplest terms, to “justify” means to *get or put or make* something right. Think of when you justify the **margins** of a document on the computer; what are you doing? You are trying to get everything lined up and neat and as “right” as it can be according to an upright, straight and consistent standard. In a similar sense, when faith is exercised, it “justifies” us ... it works to *align* us and our lives according to an upright, straight and consistent DIVINE standard. As we “marginalize” our lives in this manner, our lives start to become better aligned with how the God Who loves us and created us would have us live so we, too, might go on and be a blessing to others, as well as to ourselves. This is a crucial dimension of how Abraham was “justified” by his faith. A classic debate within Christendom over the centuries has been over the issue of “Faith or Works;” i.e., are we justified or saved through faith alone, or by some combination of faith and works, or by works alone? As I’ve said before, the short answer is that the mark of being a genuine believer is *neither* faith nor works; the mark of being a genuine believer is *having a faith that works*, or more precisely, a faith that goes to work! A FAITH WITHOUT WORKS IS A FAITH THAT DOESN’T WORK. And a faith that doesn’t work is *no* faith at all. Genuine faith not only believes *in* God, but *believes* God, and **aligns life accordingly** and goes on to do what it can to be a blessing to others. A faith that does *not* seek alignment with God’s holy Standard is a faith that just doesn’t work.

The sermon title is “Marginalizing our Faith.” Now, the usual definition of “marginalize” is to treat a concept, or a person, or a group of people as peripheral, insignificant, unimportant; to marginalize is to accord something lesser importance, pushing it to the outer edges, the margins ... out of the mainstream of our lives. Too many people *do* marginalize their faith in this manner, not treating it as essential, central, of primary importance.² That kind of

¹ As briefly explained in an NIV footnote in Gen. 15, Abram’s name is derived from two Hebrew words which mean “father” and “exalted”. Later, God gives him a new name with a promise; Abram will be called Abraham, which means “Father of many” or “Father of a multitude”.

² Something edited out due to time constraints was from an insightful article shared with me this week by a member of the congregation; see <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/our-post-christian-shrug-of-the-shoulders> The “pull” quote: “Influenced by public education, mainstream media, and perhaps the lukewarm religiosity of parents, [many] view belief as a preferential, dispensable thing, akin to a hobby. They might recognize that religion may play an important role in some people’s lives, but have decided it won’t in theirs, and certainly shouldn’t influence the public square.”

“marginalized” faith, practically speaking, is **no** faith. Abram’s faith, however, is a “marginalized” faith of the good kind, in that his faith is all about trying to get his life *justified*, lined up, aligned with the expressed will and holy standards and upright margins of the God he serves.

Quite often, faith means exercising trust in God even when we are in the minority, even when we are alone, even when no one else around us believes God exists (*or lives as if God exists or matters*). It’s significant that Jesus is alone during this time of temptation in the wilderness, a passage often read at the outset of the Lenten season. The first of the temptations of Jesus is perhaps the most primal, which is the temptation to do whatever it takes to immediately satisfy your appetite. *“If you are the son of God, tell this stone to become bread.”* A loose paraphrase of that is, *“You’re hungry, Jesus. Satisfy your appetite, scratch your itch, fill your belly, satisfy your urges. That’s what’s important in life.”* No, Jesus responds, there is something more important in life than just satisfying primal appetites. Jesus replied, *“It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, (and as Matthew 4 includes) but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”*

As a bit of an aside, something about this initial temptation that is easily missed: The context for this wilderness trial is that Jesus had *just* been baptized by John ... Matthew, Mark and Luke’s accounts all agree on that. God’s audible voice had spoken clearly from the heavens at that baptism saying, “THIS IS MY SON.” With this voice still ringing in Jesus’ ears, in all likelihood the last words He heard before entering this wilderness trial, along comes the devil saying, *“IF you are the Son of God ...”* I like to imagine Jesus responding, *“What do you mean, ‘IF?’ God just SAID I’m His Son. I don’t need to turn stones into bread or any other magical tricks to prove it.”* The subtle but potentially deadly temptation at root here is to doubt God and His clearly spoken word. *“Oh, now, c’mon; did God really say that?”* This was the mistake Adam and Eve made, allowing the Tempter to foster doubt about what God had CLEARLY SAID and then appealing to a desire in them that yearned to be filled. Again, a loose paraphrase of that original temptation, *“You must have misunderstood. He would want you to be happy. What’s important is what satisfies YOU; again, scratch your itch, fill your belly, give in to your urges.”* Well, Jesus doesn’t fail the test our first parents failed. His reply infers there is something more important in life than just satisfying desires ... and that is hearing, heeding, obeying the word of God, and especially so when He has spoken clearly about a matter. Do that, and THEN satisfy your desires accordingly!

Back to Abram. Again, faith means exercising trust in God even when we are alone, even when no one else around us believes God exists, or lives as if God exists. Faith means exercising trust in God even when many around us may have a very different understanding of how to live life in this world. The place to which God sends Abram is inhabited by people who don’t believe in his God. The Canaanites have gods of their own, and they all have a very different understanding of the world and how to live in it. In the midst of this disbelieving world to which Abram is called, we are told in this brief passage in verse 7 and 8 he builds altars, places of worship, to his God.

By building these altars, Abram is making a private and public statement that THIS God is his God ... he’s publicly affirming in that alien land that this is the God he worships and serves, this is the God to Whom he makes sacrifices, this is the God he believes has made him great promises for a future filled with hope, this is the God with Whom he seeks to “align” the margins of his life. In other words, by building and establishing and maintaining this altar, a public place of worship, Abram makes public his loyalty to God in the midst of that polytheistic and/or atheistic culture. Abram and his family are a distinct and very tiny minority in this new land, but he is making a clear and public declaration when he builds these altars ... he is making clear the holy *margins* and divine standards that align and define his life and the lives of his people. As if to make doubly clear Abram’s public intention, in verse 8 we are told he began to vocally and publicly call on the name of the Lord ... he began to *invoke* the name of the Lord, as other translations have it. To “invoke” means to call *in* God, to call God *into* our lives where we are ... and hearing, heeding, obeying His every word and living our lives and satisfying our desires accordingly!

Abram’s building and owning and maintaining an altar is the equivalent of us making clear to our colleagues or our neighbors or our parents or our children that we not only believe in God, but that we belong to a church, a public altar, a place of worship that we have a hand in building and maintaining and caring for, a public altar, a place of worship that we make a priority to attend and to tend to; a Christian church we make sacrifices to support with our time, our talent and our financial resources. And we are also saying we affirm and believe the divine message and promise and holy standards this Christian church that we built and continue to build stands for, and we seek to align our lives with it.

In short, we want to personally and publicly marginalize our faith ... lining up, aligning, justifying our lives by the holy margins set by the word of God ... and live our lives accordingly.