

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
The Genesis of Our Faith: Faithfulness  
The Rev. Dr. John Judson  
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Genesis 21:1-7; Romans 8:31-39

I want to begin this morning with two stories. Story number one concerns some windows Cindy and I purchased after we bought our home here. The windows in the home were the original 1952 windows through which you could feel the wind blow. We decided to replace them with new double pane windows that came with a 20-year guarantee. About seven years after they were installed, the seal on one of them broke. I called the company, they asked which window it was and said they would replace it in less than a week. I was dubious. Sure enough though, less than a week after my call, an installer arrived, took the old window out and put the new one in...all at no charge. Story number two concerns my parents. The house in which they lived for more than fifty years was built slab on grade...meaning there is no basement. Over time the slab began to shift causing cracks to appear in walls and ceilings. The only way to fix these cracks was to drill multiple holes in the foundation, meaning drilling holes in the floor of the house and then putting in concrete piers. On top of the piers were jacks that would level the foundation. My father did some research and found a company that would do the work at a reasonable price and had a twenty-year warranty on their work. About four years after the work was complete, the cracks returned. My father called the company and requested they return and relevel the foundation. The response from the owner was, "We don't stand behind our warranty and if you want me to fix the problem you will have to sue me."

What these two stories have in common is faithfulness, or a lack thereof. I say this because faithfulness, simply put, is nothing more than promises made and promises kept. This definition applies to faithfulness in real life and in the scriptures. Faithfulness always refers to someone making promises and keeping them. What I hope we will see this morning is that faithfulness is a critical Biblical concept for two reasons. First, because only through faithfulness can the kind of world God desires to create become a reality. This is so because faithfulness allows for trust to be built. It allows trust to be built between God and human beings and between human beings themselves. When this trust is built through the keeping of promises, the world becomes a dependable place in which all human beings have an opportunity to love God and one another and to flourish in all that they do. Unfaithfulness on the other hand, creates a broken, fearful, and hurting world. Unfaithfulness creates a world in which every relationship, whether between God and humans, or humans and God are tenuous at best, and everyone is off balance. The second reason that faithfulness is a critical Biblical concept is that it has the power to change people and change the world. We can see this in both of our stories this morning.

Our opening scripture about Abraham contains a back story which sets up the story we have before us. The back story is that the world was broken and hurting, and God decided to do something about it. What God decided to do about it was to call forth a couple, Abraham, and Sarah, and through them create a family and then a nation through which God would work God's restoration plan. Needless to say, in order to have a family and then a nation, offspring would be required. The problem was that Abraham and Sarah were not producing any children. Regardless of how hard they tried, nothing happened. Over the years God would occasionally appear and promise that they would have a child. Eventually both Abraham and Sarah gave up on that hope and ceased believing that God would be faithful and grant them a child. This reached a head when, well after Abraham and Sarah's childbearing had passed, God repeated the promise. This promise

caused both Abraham and Sarah to laugh...to laugh at the absurdity of the promise. Though God had come through with other promises, it appeared God would not come through on this one.

This is where our story begins. Our story begins with an act of almost miraculous faithfulness. God is faithful to Abraham and Sarah, so that even after Sarah is beyond childbearing age, she becomes pregnant and gives birth to Isaac. And not only that, but Isaac arrived right on the schedule that God had promised. This act of God's faithfulness changed both Sarah and Abraham...and their relationship to God. God's faithfulness changed Sarah's laughter over an absurd promise into the laughter of joy and delight. Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." Faithfulness has made her new. The faithfulness of God changes Abraham by bringing forth in him a new level of faithfulness to God. We can see this when Abraham responds to God's faithfulness with the circumcision of Isaac; an act that says, this child is a child of God. This child is not my child, but a child created in and through God's faithfulness. These two actions not only deepened and cemented God's relationship with Abraham and Sarah but would ultimately allow for God's plan to recreate the world to begin to become a reality. This is the power of God's faithfulness to change lives and our faithfulness to change the world.

Our second scripture shows us how the power of God's and Abraham's faithfulness continued to bear fruit. The back story to this part of Paul's letter is that the Christians in Rome find themselves struggling. Just as with Abraham and Sarah, all the promises of God seemed delayed. Christ had not returned, their new Jesus community was less than perfect, God's kingdom had not come. The Roman Christians were also struggling with their own personal failings, with persecution from society, with being ostracized by their families, and with death itself. In other words, they were wondering if God was faithful, if God kept God's promises. It was against that backdrop that Paul reminded the Roman Christians of God's faithfulness.

Paul reminds them that in sending Jesus into the world, God had fulfilled the promise given to Abraham, that one day all the nations of the earth would be blessed through Abraham's offspring. Paul further reminded his Roman friends that they had indeed been blessed through Jesus, even if life was not always easy. They had been blessed with forgiveness, with Christ's prayers for them, and with the love of God that never ends. In fact, Paul writes, there is nothing that can separate the Roman Christians from God's love...even death itself. The response of the Roman church to God's faithfulness was faithfulness of their own. The church and its leaders would remain faithful to God and Christ through persecution, pain, and poverty, through doubts, difficulties and even death. And that faithfulness helped to not only save the church, but to change the world by launching the church and its message of Jesus into the world. The fact is that we are here this morning because of the faithfulness of those who remembered and experienced God's faithfulness in Christ and responded with faithfulness over the last two-thousand years.

Faithfulness matters. And I say this not to guilt any of us who might feel that we have not been perfect in the keeping of our promises to God. I say it first in the context of God's faithfulness to us; that God, regardless of our past, remains faithful to God's promises of love for us. God never, ever ceases to love us. God's faithfulness becomes a foundation on which we can build our lives. Second, I say that faithfulness matters, because when we are faithful in our promises to God, we can change the world. When we are faithful to our promises to love God and neighbor, the world begins to look more and more like the renewed creation toward which we and God are working. My challenge to you then is this, to ask yourselves, how am I being faithful to God in such a way, that my love for God and neighbor is changing the world around me?