

Hoping Against Hope

Sermon preached at Christ Church, Georgetown
Washington, D.C.
February 28, 2021 / Second Sunday in Lent

by Andrew A. Kryzak

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Romans 4:13-25

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

One of the most attractive qualities of St Peter is that, if there is an opportunity to do something wrong, St Peter does it wrong. He is impulsive, headstrong, and foolhardy. He was famously cowardly when it most counted. All of this runs contrary to the conventional wisdom about the nature of saints.

The rest of the disciples are not much better, and in some cases even worse. If the gospels teach us anything about them, it's that the disciples were a ragtag bunch of fishermen, tax collectors, and at least one double agent. Over the centuries, the Roman Church may have thrown up cults around impossibly virtuous and holy men and women to maintain a robust trade in relics and ecclesiastical tourism, but the Twelve chosen by our Lord himself were exactly as human as you and as me.

To understand why this is so significant, our lessons this morning take us back to the very beginning of God's saving work in human history.

Week by week during Lent, we're getting a whirlwind tour of the story of salvation. Last week, we heard a bit of God's promise to Noah and his descendants: that he would never again destroy the earth with a flood. This week, we come to Abraham. We know from the Sunday-school ditty that: *Father Abraham had many sons; many sons had father Abraham*, but it is worth pausing to think about why that fact should be remarkable.

Abraham was *as good as dead*, as St Paul writes in our second lesson this morning.¹ From the biological perspective of the Old Testament, he had no human potential, being a very, very old man. He had no genealogical future, and neither did his wife, Sarah. When she overhears God's promise that she and Abraham will have a child, she responds just the same way you and I would respond: she laughs at God.²

¹ Romans 4:19

² Genesis 18:12

Prior to this morning's story, we also learn that Abraham and Sarah are devious, and jealous, often hapless, and sometimes just plain hopeless. And yet. These two, with all of their faults and foibles, take their places in the history of salvation as the recipients of God's blessed promise that they will be the progenitors of many nations, the mother and father of God's chosen people. As one Old Testament scholar put the case, "If [God] did not go astray in his work of sacred history because of the failure and guilt of the recipient of that promise, then his word was [all the more] truly to be believed."³ That promise is so far beyond what can reasonably be hoped for in this world that what other reply could there possibly be, but to laugh?

If I were to ask you what you hope for, how would you answer that question? An end to the pandemic, certainly. Health and prosperity for yourself and your loved ones, probably. World peace? Maybe. I've noticed that, as I've gotten older, the scope of the things I hope for has contracted. As a ten-year old, I might have hoped for interstellar space travel within my lifetime, or at least flying cars, which we were all promised by 2015.⁴ But as I have gotten older and seen more of the world, I tend to hope for things that seem *likely*. World peace? Well, maybe if a number of unlikely geopolitical things happen in precisely the right sequence, maybe... But, really, hoping for something like world peace is laughable, isn't it?

In our second lesson this morning, St Paul writes, "In hope [Abraham] believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations; as he had been told."⁵

Hoping against hope is a gambling metaphor. It means that the only thing we can put up as collateral is hope itself. We *hope against hope* when we have exhausted every valuable thing that we can bring to the table, when we have nothing left to wager. We *hope against hope* when our résumés and our bank accounts and our reputations can no longer help us.

That is what it means to have faith. Abraham trusted in the promises of God, trusted in those promises against all his experience and all of his worldly knowledge, and it was "reckoned to him as righteousness," it was credited to an account that was totally exhausted *except* for that faith.⁶

The foundation of the Christian life is training ourselves to be faithful, to *hope against hope* throughout our lives, not merely when we are at the end of our proverbial ropes. St Paul, who famously told the Philippians how much he had to boast about, went on to say this: "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss

³ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 170.

⁴ See: *Back to the Future Part II*.

⁵ Romans 4:18

⁶ Romans 4:22; cf. Genesis 15:6

because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”⁷ In the King James Version, that phrase is translated to say that Paul counts all of his worldly accomplishments as nothing “but dung,” compared to knowing our Lord.⁸ That doesn’t mean he didn’t put his gifts to use in the Lord’s service; we know from his voluminous correspondence that his fertile mind and pen were deployed constantly. What it means is that the source of his strength and the ground of his hope were not rooted in his own abilities or attributes, but in Christ. This is what it means to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow our Lord.⁹ It is to trust not in our own righteousness, but in God’s manifold and great mercies.¹⁰

St Peter didn’t get it. He thought Jesus was going to be an earthly king, the son of David ruling over the earthly Jerusalem. When he heard that his Lord would be rejected, condemned in a show trial, and executed, it makes sense that he was shocked and appalled. But this is why our Lord turns on Peter, saying, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men.”¹¹ To be on the side of men leads always to a predictable result: earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. To be on the side of men leads us to hope for only those few things that we think might reasonably occur.

But in Christ, we are given cause and power to *hope against hope*, to look forward to things that are not only beyond all reason but are in fact beyond the capacity of human achievement, and not only in the next world. That is the very definition of the Christian faith. To say we have faith is not to assent to the proposition that God exists, but to put our whole lives, our whole trust in the God “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist,” *right here and right now*.¹²

Neither Peter, nor Abraham and Sarah, nor St Paul, for that matter, was perfect. Like us, none had any chips to play. But the heroes of the faith are not those men and women who were perfect and who made no errors. The heroes of the faith are those flawed individuals whose whole lives, whose entire hope was rooted in the promises of God to remake the heavens and the earth, from the mountains and the forests to the human heart itself.

In that promise we hope against hope.

AMEN.

⁷ Philippians 3:4-8

⁸ Paul’s word is ἀκύβαλον, which means something closer to *refuse* or *waste*.

⁹ Mark 8:34

¹⁰ Prayer of Humble Access, Book of Common Prayer (1979), 337.

¹¹ Mark 8:33

¹² Romans 4:17