

Akron Christian Reformed Church

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Genesis 11.31-12.5; Acts 7.1-8; John 8.57-59

Our Credo

Prayer: Almighty God. You have walked with us and with our mothers and fathers for generations, and for your faithfulness, we give you all honor and praise and glory. For we are here, because you have drawn us. We are in relationship with you, because you have healed us. We know you, because you have revealed yourself. Truly, who we are depends upon you and your actions. Give us ears today, to hear your voice and to understand your word, so that our faith may be strengthened once again. Amen.

Faith is a tricky subject. What is it? Is it constant or fluctuating? Is faith simply what we profess to believe in our head and heart? Or, is faith an action? Is faith something that can be lost, or gained? What do you mean when you say that you're "a person of faith?"

I tend to think of faith as a structure that encompasses me and gives my life shape. A framework upon which my life is hung. All of who I am, how I think, what I do, what I imagine to be true or not true, is tied together by this faith structure. But within this faith structure there's a great deal of room for variations, vacillations, uncertainty, fear, and the like. It pulsates almost.

There are times when my faith structure is sharp and defined and strong. There are rare moments when everything fits together and all of creation hums in harmony. But there are large swaths of time when I'm not really even aware of my faith structure shaping what I do, or what I think, or what I believe. It's just there, in the background. And then there are times when my faith structure seems utterly ludicrous. When the idea of God seems downright stupid.

So, it's not as if faith is this thing that is always present and never changing. It's not as if it's something concrete that I can point to.

It's not like my car, where every time I walk outside of my house, there it sits. Looking just the same as when I left it. I can always climb in and drive away. I can simply walk past it day after day and never drive it. But it's always there, the same as before.

Faith isn't like that. Faith is so much more nebulous. And even when I today say that, "I believe in God," it doesn't necessarily mean the same thing as next week when I say, "I believe in God." And yet, my belief in God is what gives shape to my life. Your belief in God gives shape to your life.

Don Postema just yesterday said to me, "Harry, I only believe in one thing. God. God is my credo. That's what the word credo means. People often try to get me to believe in other things. Like to believe in abortion, or in evolution, or in climate change. Nope. I only believe in God. God is my credo. Now, I will say that I think that evolution is true. But it's not my credo." Our faith in God gives shape to our life.

I love our Old Testament reading this morning, which I did extend from what the lectionary assigned for today. I think it gives us a clearer view of faith when we read that Abram's father, Terah, picked up his family to move them to Canaan. "But when they came to Harran they settled there."

Then just two sentences later it says, "The LORD had said to Abram, 'Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.'"

And I think, “When had the LORD said that to Abram?” There isn’t any dialogue, or monologue, by the LORD to Abram before this. All there is, is his father moving the family to Canaan, but then stopping in Haran.

And slowly we begin to see that the LORD probably first called Terah to follow him all the way to Canaan, so that Terah may become a great nation. And Terah at first agrees to go. He packs up his entire family and walks 600 miles to Haran – a trip that took months. And I’m rather convinced that Terah was following the LORD God. But when Terah and the family arrived in Haran, it seems good enough, and so “they settled there.” (11.31)

Later, and we don’t know how much later, probably after Haran the patriarch dies, the LORD calls Abram to move from Haran to Canaan.¹ And Abram, Sarai, Lot and the family leave Haran to travel another 400 miles.

And we might imagine that this would be a trip fraught with danger, but it really wasn’t. They walked a trade route that stretched from Egypt all the way past Ur to the Persian Gulf. It was a route that was protected by the various Kings because trade was nearly sacred. On the way to Haran they would have passed Babylon, the Tower of Babel; Nineveh; Baghdad, Mosul and other significant centers.

Malachi Martin in a 1983 article in the New York Times, entitled, *Footsteps of Abraham* writes:

What’s hard for us to understand is ... the remarkable security in which they actually made the trek. In fact, they traveled every inch of the long way by established trade routes complete with milestones, armed patrols, river fords, guardhouses, food depots and secure cities. The only serious enemies they might face were disease and the dreaded dust storm When [they] left Ur, then, and traveled up through the territory of modern Iraq, [Terah’s family] set out upon a "royal highway" through an area governed by civil law, bristling with trade and communications, inhabited by populations who enjoyed music and painting and sculpture and a written literature of plays, poems, epics, songs and novels. (NYT, March 13, 1983)

Then, eventually, eventually, this little clan from Iraq arrives in Canaan, in Palestine, in what we would call “The West Bank,” about 30 miles north of the place that would eventually become Jerusalem. And the LORD says, “I will give this land to your offspring.” And there’s been a family feud over the land ever since.

Soon after arriving in Shechem, Abram built an altar to the LORD who had appeared to him and told him to go. This area was now home. I don’t know how populated it was. One gets the feeling it was like the wild west where Europeans just arrived and sectioned off the land and claimed it. Never mind the people who may have been there before.

But the point is, right here, with Genesis 12, we encounter the beginning of God’s people. The beginning of God’s relationship with people. So, right here, in Genesis 12, we witness the beginning of the Jews. And the beginning of all of those Jewish stories that we know. Stories of the kings and the prophets who opposed them. The judges, the warriors, the stories of enslavement and miraculous returning to the land. All of that begins right here, right now, at “the great tree of Moreh at Shechem.” This is the beginning of God’s great work to draw the whole earth into relationship with the LORD God, the creator of heaven and earth.

From this ancient event that happened over 4000 years ago, the Christ eventually arises and dwells among us, full of truth and grace. Out of this ancient story Jesus Christ comes to us, to suffer and

¹ “The land I will show you.” 12.1; “they set out for the land of Canaan.” 12.5; “the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem.” 12.6

die, and draw us into relationship with God. Out of this ancient story, the church is created, and God's people expand to include people from all over the world.

And our church, this ACRC, has its roots in this ancient story of Abram and Sarai wandering a thousand miles to settle in this foreign land. Shechem is our home as well.

You and me, we are the offspring of Abram and Sarai. We're part of the great people that the LORD began to create so long ago. We're part of the people who've been blessed by Abram and Sarai.

Therefore, we marvel when we read the story of our clan. We laugh with great joy when we glimpse father Abram and mother Sarai. Here are our roots.

And the thing that struck me most powerfully this week is just how long the LORD has been working to restore a relationship with the whole earth. The LORD never gives up and resorts to pre-sto-chango magic. Even though we all beg for God to do magic. The LORD allows the holy people of God to develop and mature organically – through many dangers and troubles and harrowing events. The people grow and expand, in spite of great persecution and overwhelming struggles with their own political leaders and with the leaders of the nations. The LORD is always present. Always leading. Always guiding. But in such subtle ways that the LORD's activity is easily lost.

But when we step back. When we look at the story of the LORD's work and presence among the people, we can clearly see the hand of the LORD at work.

We make a grave mistake if we think of our faith as our own, little, private creation and possession. Who we are as Christians belongs properly within the context of the LORD's great organic, evolving work with the LORD's people.

What we believe. Who we are. What we will become. Does not belong to us. It's all a work of God among us. Terah, Abram, Sarai and even Lot is the beginning of what we call "our faith."

Your faith is not your own creation to be lost or expanded. It's a gift from the generations. It's a gift from the LORD God.

We live in an age of individualism. We've deluded ourselves into thinking that we're all at the helm of our life. Guiding it. Controlling it. Creating it. We've deluded ourselves into thinking that we do this independently of one another. But that's all a delusion.

In reality, our story is part of Abram and Sarai's story. Our story is part of God's great work to bless all people. Our story is part of the LORD's work to drag us back into relationship with our God. Our story, what we call our faith, is the continuation of the incremental work of God in this world. And for this we must be thankful.

The old priest told the young man to recite the Apostle's Creed every day. "But I don't believe in it," the young man said. "No one asked you if you believe in it or not. It's not your Creed to believe or to reject. It's the Creed of the Church. Millions of Christians have recited it over and over for millennia. It's the Church's creed. Recite the Creed of the Church."

During this time of Lent, step back and look at the larger picture of faith into which you fit. Notice those people of faith who preceded you. Notice the ones who taught you the stories of our people. You are not alone. You have not made your own faith. You can't even lose your faith because it's not yours. Faith belongs to the people of God. To the community of God -- of which you're a part. The LORD God is at work with you, so that future generations will flourish as God's people, and the whole earth will be blessed. Thanks be to God

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.