

Romans 4:13-25; Hebrews 11:8-12; Genesis 11:30-12:9; 15:1-6

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Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

All in God's Time

TRUSTING GOD'S FUTURE IN OUR PRESENT

Let us pray: Living God, give us faith to be sure of what we hope for, and certain of what we do not see; to believe that you are faithful, and that you reward those who truly seek you: that we may please you and receive what you have promised; in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The doctor is in and help is 10¢. Lucy sits in her “psychiatrist” booth and says to Charlie Brown, “Maybe I can put it another way . . . Life, Charlie Brown, is like a deck chair . . .”

“Like a what?” he asks.

“Have you ever been on a cruise ship?” Lucy asks. “Passengers open up these canvas deck chairs so they can sit in the sun . . . Some people place their chairs facing the rear of the ship so they can see where they’ve been . . . Other people face their chairs forward . . . They want to see where they’re going! On the cruise ship of life, Charlie Brown, which way is your cruise ship facing?”

Poor Charlie Brown! He tells Lucy, “I’ve never been able to get one unfolded . . .”

On the cruise ship of life, which way is your deck chair facing? Imagine the apostle Paul being asked that question. His answer might sound like what he wrote to the Christians at Philippi: “Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 3:12-14)

But, what, exactly, lies ahead? Ah, there’s the question and the challenge of living a faithful Christian life. How do we trust in God’s future while we live in present circumstances that, many times and in many ways, tempt us to wonder if God will be true to his word?

If only the future were guaranteed, it would be so much easier, right? But who knows? In a 2015 article called “What will life be like in 2035?” Dean Evans wrote, “Predicting the future is notoriously risky, especially if you claim to be an expert and then get it spectacularly wrong. In 1883 Lord Kelvin, president of Britain’s Royal Society, declared ‘X-rays will prove to be a hoax.’ Arthur Summerfield, the U.S. Postmaster General in 1959, predicted that mail would be ‘delivered within hours from New York to Australia by guided missiles.’ And we should be glad that Alex Lewyt’s 1955 notion of ‘nuclear-powered vacuum cleaners’ never made it to the drawing board.”¹

Someone says, “Trust me,” and we want to know more. What are the risks? What are the pluses and minuses? What is your track record? Why should I trust you? What guarantees can you give me?

So, how will we respond when God says “Trust me”? In a nutshell, that’s what the story of Abram is all about. How will he respond when God tells him, in so many words, “Trust me”? God doesn’t actually use those very words when he calls Abram in Haran. Instead, God tells Abram to do something – “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” (Genesis 12:1) The epistle lesson from Hebrews 11 is a commentary on God’s command and Abram’s response: “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” (Hebrews 11:8-10)

This section of Genesis 12:1 – 17:27 is called the *Lech L’cha* in the Jewish Torah, the first five books of what we call the Old Testament. *Lech L’cha* literally means “Go forth.” Abraham’s story is the third selection in the annual cycle of reading through the Torah. *Lech L’cha* is not a mere suggestion. *Lech L’cha* is not an offer God makes for Abram to consider if he doesn’t have anything better to do. *Lech L’cha* is a Hebrew imperative, meaning something like “Go! Get going!”

One Presbyterian preacher put it this way: “God’s call is two sided. God calls us saying, ‘Come and follow me.’ We arrive and then we must follow. We find but must go on seeking. God’s call is a never-ending call, to the unknown, to adventure, to follow God in the night, in solitude. It is a call incessantly to go further, and further. For it is not static but dynamic (as creation is also dynamic) and reaching God means going on and on. God’s call is like the call to become an explorer; it is an invitation to adventure.”²

God told Abram, “Go! Get going!” By faith, Abram obeyed and went. But it couldn’t have been easy. And that wasn’t the end of the story! You see, God had another promise for Abram, a promise we first hear about in Chapter 12 and again in Chapter 15: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. . . Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. So shall your descendants be.”

Of course, there was a BIG problem with this particular promise. Do you remember how today’s story began? “Now Sarai was barren; she had no child.” (Genesis 11:30) Abram reminded God of that little fly in the ointment when he said, “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” The footnote in my study Bible says, “Abram desires a sign or reassurance – or perhaps he means: What is ‘reward’ worth without an heir?” In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul gets a little more detailed in his description of the obvious roadblock to God’s promise ever coming true. He bluntly describes Abram’s body as “already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old).”

Paul also doesn't neglect to mention the barrenness of Sarah's womb. (Romans 4:19) And that was another twenty-five years *after* God first promised Abram he would have a son and become the father of many nations.

And Abram believed God. He didn't believe a set of doctrines *about* God. Abram wasn't convinced by God's magnificent arguments and proofs. Abram didn't accept God's promise with strings attached. Abram believed God or, better yet, Abram *trusted* God to do what God promised to do – give him a son and make him the father of many nations. All Abram had was God's word or, as Walter Brueggemann puts it, "He has now permitted God to be not a hypothesis about the future, but the voice around which his life is organized."³

Here's how the apostle Paul talks about Abram's faith in God: "Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become 'the father of many nations,' according to what was said, 'So numerous shall your descendants be' . . . being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised." (Romans 4:18, 21) The letter to the Hebrews says the same thing, "because he considered [God] faithful who had promised." (Hebrews 11:11)

Genesis 15:6 is one of the foundational Bible verses, especially for Protestant Presbyterian Reformed theology: "And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness." That verse is at the heart of what it means to be saved by God's grace through faith. That verse means that, from the get-go, our being put in a right relationship with God is something God does, not something we do. God offers the gift, the promise. We are called to trust that God is and always will be true to his word.

But, guess what? The Hebrew of verse 6 is a little ambiguous. We read it as "The Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness." But the Hebrew simply says, "he reckoned it to him as righteousness." In other words, the verse could mean, "Abram believed the Lord; and Abram reckoned it to the Lord as righteousness." In other words, Abram believed that God would be true to his promise. This is good news, folks! God can be trusted to do what God promises to do.

Here are some helpful comments along those lines, that recognize that the circumstances of our lives don't always make it easy to trust God's promises. "The heart of this interaction [between God and Abram] is faith and trust. If Abram understands God to be righteous, to be one whose word is firm and secure, to be one who will make good on God's promises, then Abram can believe. The same is true for us. Belief is hard enough when there is a delay between God's promises and their fulfillment. It would be nigh impossible if the God in whom we believe is not trustworthy, is not righteous."⁴ "In any case, it is clear that this divine promise comes without proof of its future fulfillment. The faith of Abraham has to deal with a promise in the midst of uncertainty. Ultimately, then, the emphasis is on the one who makes the promise and on the risk, vulnerability, and uncertainty in receiving divine promise."⁵

You don't need me to tell you that we hear God's call to trust him in the midst of uncertainty. Personal life circumstances and global events are enough to make us doubt. The apparent delay between promise and fulfillment can be discouraging. The riskiness of saying, "OK, God, I will trust you and go where you lead me" threatens our security and sense of control. And, yet, God's invitation is always there. He doesn't force his promise on us, but neither does he take his promise away when we fail to trust him.

So, it wouldn't hurt to hear again some of God's promises:

- (Matthew 18:20) "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."
- (John 11:25) "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."
- (Matthew 28:20) "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."
- (Romans 8:39) "Nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

As this sermon ends, here's a prayer reflection on how Abraham continued to trust God's promises. These words also speak to us about trusting God's future in our present:

Hope nonetheless.

Hope despite.

Hope regardless.

Hope still.

Hope where we had ceased to hope.

Hope amid what threatens hope.

Hope with those who feed our hope.

Hope beyond what we had hoped.

Hope that draws us past our limits.

Hope that defies expectations.

Hope that questions what we have known.

Hope that makes a way where there is none.

Hope that takes us past our fear.

Hope that calls us into life.

Hope that holds us beyond death.

Hope that blesses those to come.⁶

Let us pray: O God, you have promised to be our God through all generations. You called into existence things that did not exist: the universe and all that inhabits it. From Abraham and Sarah you brought forth nations, calling them to walk before you in the righteousness that comes from faith. Now you justify all who put their faith in you, through him, counting it to us as righteousness, and promising us the full riches of your grace when Christ comes in glory. Thank you, Lord. Amen.

NOTES

¹Dean Evans, "What will life be like in 2035?" November 20, 2015 at www.suncorp.com.au.

²Rev. Clover Beal, "Go! Get Going! (Lech L'cha) – Genesis 12:1-9" October 27, 2013 at www.fhcpresb.org.

³Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 144.

⁴Sara Koenig, "Commentary on Genesis 15:1-6," August 11, 2013 at www.workingpreacher.org.

⁵Howard Wallace, "Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18, Year C: Lent 2," February 24, 2013 at www.hwallace.unitingchurch.org.au.

⁶Jan L. Richardson, "Rough Translations (inspired by Romans 4:18)," at www.paintedprayerbook.com.