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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16, Mark 8:31-38
The Lord Loves All Sorts of Folks

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. ²And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.” (Genesis 17:1, RSV)

One of the great things about the Bible is its enthusiasm for folks at all stages of life. The Lord can use the young lad David to defeat mighty Goliath, and the Lord can use the old man Simeon to teach the church to sing the *Nunc Dimittis*:

Lord, now you let your servant go in peace; your word has been fulfilled... (LBW)

Indeed, the Bible rejoices and does not doubt but that the prayer of the Psalmist is heard by the Lord and granted:

¹⁸Now also when I am old and grayheaded, O God, forsake me not... (Psalm 71:18, KJV)

Consider today’s story about Abraham and Sarah. This is a story about old people. They are far beyond child-bearing years. A few years ago, this story came up in the lectionary for the Tuesday morning communion service in the nursing home at The Wartburg. My wife, Carol, who is Chaplain there, remembers turning to an elderly couple who were sitting there beside each other, holding hands. She said to them, “Rose, it would be like God coming to you and saying, ‘Guess what! You’re going to have a baby!’” Now this couple had been married for over seventy-five years! Louie has since died and gone to heaven, at the age of 102, but Rose is still living – getting close to 100. So, Carol said this to them. She looked at them and they looked at her, and then Rose cracked up. She laughed, much like Sarah did when the three visitors came to visit her and Abraham at the Oaks of Mamre.

Why did Sarah laugh? Well, it’s incredible really, to think that someone so old could actually become pregnant and give birth to a son. But Abraham and Sarah did believe. They cast the ordinary reckoning of things to the wind and instead trusted to the word of the Lord. And in that, they became heroes of faith, founders of the people of God, and a blessing to multitudes of nations, to this very day.

This sermon, then, is dedicated to people like Abraham and Sarah: people who were beloved of the Lord and very useful to him even though they were not in the prime of life nor mighty in the ways of the world. They had strength, but it was the strength of trusting the Lord. It was the strength of faith. In the eyes of the world, they might not have been of much account. Their day was passed, so they might have thought, or maybe they were frail all along, never really having a prime of life when they were strong and brimming with confidence. The theme of this sermon is that there is never a day in our life when our Maker does not love us and look at us with hope that we will serve him that day. Our God can use a variety of people. He can use all sorts of people in all conditions of life. He can use any of us so long as we are not like Peter in today's Gospel story.

NOT LIKE PETER!

Ahh! Peter! Peter so quickly shifts from heights of faith to depths of unbelief. Just before today's Gospel Lesson, Peter has done well. He has given his Great Confession concerning his master, Jesus:

²⁹And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ." (Mark 8:29, RSV)

Now, just a few verses later, Peter receives such a rebuke as I hope never to receive from my Lord:

³³But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter, and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men." (Mark 8:33, RSV)

The fundamental problem here is that Peter preferred his own notions to that of Jesus. Jesus had been teaching about the Son of Man. He meant himself. What he said included much sorrow. He spoke of suffering, rejection, and death:

³¹And he began to teach them, that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders, and of the chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. (Mark 8:31, KJV)

This all troubled and offended Peter, and in that, Peter went wrong. It is better, I say, to cling to the Word of God than to our own notions of things.

So, that's what my heroes in this sermon all did. They vary in many respects, but they are united in their attachment to the Word of God. They come from various stations and stages in life, but they were all beloved and useful to God because they cherished his word.

Notice, then, the contrasts at play in these heroes of the Bible. We will see that the Lord can use the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the stolid and the

temperamental, the strong and the sick, the free and the imprisoned. If I went on long enough with such contrasts, I bet I would find some grid within which you and I fit. And that is what I want: I want each of us to walk out of church this morning believing that time's a'wasting, and that the Lord loves and has need of each of us.

Each of my contrasts can be illustrated by more than one story in the Bible, but I will offer just one each, to try to move speedily along. First, the Lord can use the young, but also the old.

BOTH THE YOUNG AND THE OLD

I have already mentioned young David, who fought Goliath in the name of the Lord. But there are three other Biblical heroes whose youth is emphasized. I mean the three youths whose story we love to hear Chris Schulze read aloud for us each Easter Vigil: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Could anything be more brave than the answer these young men gave to King Nebuchadnezzar when he threatened to hurl them into the burning fiery furnace?

¹⁶Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. ¹⁷If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. ¹⁸But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up.” (Daniel 3:16-18, NRSV)

This answer made Nebuchadnezzar furious. He made the furnace seven times hotter than it was wont to be, and hurled those three young men into the furnace. They were saved amidst the flames by the Lord, but even if they had not been, their testimony to the king was the stuff of the saints and martyrs. They would rather cleave to the Lord than to keep even their lives.

You young men and women: know that you are capable of great deeds of faith. Our Lord Jesus knew well what he said when he set a child in the midst of the disciples and urged them to become like them:

²And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them, ³and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 18:2-4, RSV)

For an illustration of the elderly, I could mention today's heroes, Abraham and Sarah. But let me lift up another old one: I am thinking of the father in our Lord's parable of the Prodigal Son. I do not actually know the age of the father, but I

figure that in the eyes of the young, all fathers are old! Anyway, this father had grown sons, and I have always pictured him as rather old, lifting up his weary eyes to the horizon, searching, searching for his wayward son. This father is one of the greatest heroes of the Bible, for he has long been thought to be a revelation of the heart of God himself.

You fathers and mothers, you elderly folk who might never have married: let none of us think that we are washed up and useless. The Lord has affection for the elderly and can well use their wisdom and what life has taught them to help others along in this world.

THE RICH AND THE POOR

When it comes to an illustration of the rich, again I could refer to father Abraham, who had many flocks and herds. But let me move on to another giant of faith: I mean Job. His wealth was emphasized both at the start of his story and at the end. In between, Job was sorely tried, but he clung to God even when his world was collapsing. In all his sorrows, Job did not curse or forsake the Lord, and in the end he is rewarded for faith in God that went beyond what the eye can see.

And for the poor, on the other hand, I can hardly do better than the widow in the Temple. She gives her penny to the Temple treasury and goes quietly away.

⁴²And a poor widow came, and put in two copper coins, which make a penny. (Mark 12:42, RSV)

No one notices her, except for the Lord. Her penny is not worth much in terms of the temple finances, but it is worth mountains of gold in the eyes of the Lord. Being poor was no hindrance to being faithful, and God above sees and cherishes the good deeds of the poor.

THE STOLID AND THE TEMPERAMENTAL

Next, let me speak of the stolid and the temperamental. The people of God vary in their emotional lives. Some are even-keeled, some are passionate or moody.

For the stolid, I think of one of my favorite characters in the Bible: Joseph the Carpenter, the protector of the Holy Family. Talk about someone who can take things in stride! His beloved Mary, his fiancée, is pregnant, and not by him. When the Child is born, he must gather up his family and flee down to Egypt, to escape the murderous wrath of King Herod. When twelve-year-old Jesus lingers behind in the Temple and worries his parents half-to-death, never do we hear a word of complaint from Joseph. He probably dies somewhere during the life of Jesus, for we do not find him at the Cross, but no word is spared for him, nor does he seem like the kind of fellow who would want a word spoken. Joseph is simply steady.

On the other hand, we have the prophet Jeremiah – another of my favorite people in the Bible. He has obvious gifts of eloquence, but also a tendency toward

despondency. In fact, in one dramatic passage, the Lord listens to the laments of Jeremiah long enough and then simply cuts him short. He does not even bother to respond to Jeremiah's complaints, but simply asks Jeremiah to repent, so that the Lord can make use of the man again. Jeremiah is midstride, with his eloquent complaints:

¹⁸Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Wilt thou be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail? (Jeremiah 15:18, KJV)

And in the very next verse, it is as if the Lord wipes his hand over all the laments, tosses them to the side, and calls upon Jeremiah to repent:

¹⁹Therefore thus says the LORD: "If you return, I will restore you, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall be as my mouth. (Jeremiah 15:19, KJV)

Why does the Lord offer repentance to Jeremiah? Because the Lord stands ready to use the temperamental too. So if we are such, know that the Lord has need of us.

THE STRONG AND THE SICK

Next, the strong and the sick. For the strong, the obvious example was Samson. He does not seem to have been an intellectual, but he was indeed a man of strength. The welfare of Israel was advanced through this mighty man.

And for the weak, there are plenty of cases in the Bible of people who were sick, but were healed and gave testimony to the Lord. But there is one case that is interesting because the man remains sick, but useful to the Lord. I mean St. Paul. I bet we sometimes forget this feature of the man. Not only was Paul brilliant and argumentative, not only was he buffeted by storms and disappointed by friends, but also he had to endure some kind of affliction. The one who wrote those mighty letters seems to have been in a state of continual discomfort. Why he should be afflicted was a mystery to Paul, because he prayed most earnestly that he should be spared from his troubles. But it was not the will of the Lord, and so Paul yielded to that. Here is the great passage:

⁷And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. ⁸Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; ⁹but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:7-9, RSV)

Once, when I was visiting dear Sr. Elinor Brünngraber in the hospital, I mentioned that I felt a little bit shy about the traditional pastoral advice that the sick should pray for the sick. Here she was, very weak and ill. The Lord was in fact laying her to rest. But Sr. Elinor stood up for the traditional teaching. She pointed out to me that there is something special about the prayers of the sick, because they can so honestly sympathize with those for whom they are praying. It was easy for me to believe that the Lord especially loves the prayers of the sick. No matter what our condition, our God can use us.

THE IMPRISONED AND THE FREE.

Finally, we have this contrast: the Lord can use us whether we are imprisoned or free. For this contrast, let me point to one story. I mean the story of Paul and Silas in prison. The beginning of the story shows how useful these apostles were though they wore chains in prison:

²⁵But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them... (Acts 16:25, RSV)

This is faith, to wear chains in the dark prison cell, and yet to sing and bear testimony to the Lord.

And the setting free of the prisoners also shows that when we are bound or free, we can be useful to the Lord:

²⁶and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and every one's fetters were unfastened. ²⁷When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." ²⁹And he called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, ³⁰and brought them out and said, "Men, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." ³²And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all that were in his house. ³³And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their wounds, and he was baptized at once, with all his family. ³⁴Then he brought them up into his house, and set food before them; and he rejoiced with all his household that he had believed in God. (Acts 16:26-34, RSV)

They were free! How sweet freedom is! They could have run away, but they lingered, and in lingering, they saved a soul.

FAITH

All of these folks were good examples of faith. They varied in strength, health, prosperity, and freedom, but they were united in trusting the Lord even when things were otherwise doubtful. In this, they all were illustrations of the praise St. Paul gives to father Abraham:

¹⁸In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations; as he had been told, “So shall your descendants be.” ¹⁹He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead because he was about a hundred years old, or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. ²⁰No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. (Romans 4:18-21, RSV)

In their own way, each of these folks took up their cross and followed the One who above all others clung to the Word of his heavenly Father, and who lives and reigns to bring good from our faith too, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.