

THEA'S SERMON 02.07.17 Abraham & Isaac.

Have you ever compared yourself to the great heroes of the faith and found yourself coming a discouraging second or third best, or even feeling as if you aren't even in the race?

Let's look at Abraham. He was originally called Abram. He was 75 years old when God first promised he would become the father of a great nation if he would take his family to a land he would be shown. He left Haran, where he had lived most of his life, taking his wife, orphaned nephew Lot, cattle, sheep, slaves and all the wealth he had accumulated in Haran and went to Canaan. God repeated his promise there and Abram built an altar. That's the second time.

Famine drove him to Egypt where he allowed his wife Sarai, who was also his half sister, to be taken into Pharaoh's harem. Pharaoh paid him handsomely with sheep, oxen, slaves & camels. God protected Sarai - she was returned to Abram and the family was escorted out of Egypt by the army.

Abram returned to Canaan to the place where he had built the altar and worshipped God. By this time he and Lot had large, prosperous households. There wasn't room for them all so they parted, Lot to the fertile plains and cities of the Jordan valley and Abram to the wider parts of Canaan. Perhaps Abram had hoped that his promised descendants would be through Lot.

God renewed his promise. That's the third time. Abram built another altar.

Abram became involved in the wars that filled the land. He had his own army of 318 men, all born in his household. The Lord brought him safely through the wars. The mysterious encounter with Melchizedek and Melchizedek's blessing happened at this time. God renewed his promise. That's four times. Abram asked God what use the promises were if he didn't have an heir. God dramatically renewed his promise. You can read the details in Genesis 15. That's five times.

This is when it is recorded that Abram believed God and he was counted as righteous because of his faith.

Soon after, Sarai gave the slave girl Hagar to Abram and she bore him a son, Ishmael. Abram was 86. The promise had been given five times in eleven years.

Thirteen years later, when Abram was 99, God again renewed his promise. That's six times. He also changed Abram's name to Abraham, the father of many nations, and Sarai's to Sarah, princess. He promised Abraham that Sarah, who was 90 would bear him a son. God again gave him the promise. That's seven times.

Abraham again allowed Sarah to be taken into a harem, saying she was his sister. The Lord protected her and she was returned to Abraham with a handsome compensation gift of cattle, sheep, slaves and silver.

Now we come to last week's episode of the story. Isaac was born and Hagar and Ishmael sent away. Carol reminded us that God coped with Abraham's mistakes and messes and he can cope with ours.

Have you calculated how long it was between God's first promise to Abraham and the seventh? About 25 years of prosperity, warfare, heartbreak and mistakes.

Move on another 15 or so years. Isaac was strong enough to carry a heavy load of firewood a day's walk which included a steep hill climb. God used this experience to demonstrate to Abraham, after all these years, that what he, Abraham, wanted most, was God, not promises of prosperity, peace and posterity; more even than his son Isaac.

God took around 40 years all told, of persistent and patient care to bring Abraham to the point where he knew that God was his first priority. This encourages me and I hope it encourages you as we are led on in our faith journey.

In the meantime, there are things we can do if we feel forgotten. Like David, in Psalm 13, we can tell God honestly how we feel, then tell him that we trust him and feel glad.

We like to feel useful. When a feeling of uselessness becomes a burden, Matthew 10:42 is an encouragement. In our abundant society, we are unlikely to find a thirsty child, but there are thirsty children in many places. We can help with a gift to one of the many charitable organisations bringing relief. There are suggestions in the pewsheet. Follow your gift with prayer. A wise man once said, "Don't fail to do something just because you can't do everything." God sees and rewards. He also rewards random acts of kindness.

Now to the Romans reading. There is controversy about who wrote Romans. Please allow me to say “Paul” rather than “the writer of Romans”.

In Romans 3:4, Paul quotes Gen 15:6. “Abraham believed God, who accounted him righteous on account of his faith.” Abraham was 86 at the time - about 11 years after the first promise. It was about 30 years later that he realised the full implication of his faith.

I can't comprehend all the wonderful things that Paul tells us arise from our belief that Jesus Christ, God's own son, died for our sins and then rose again. I believe that Christ's death covers my sins and gives me new life, but I don't see the results I want to see in my life. Perhaps you feel the same. Abraham's story encourages me to believe that God is working patiently, persistently and carefully in my life, and one day I will know and love God just as much as he knows and loves me. (1 Cor 13:12)

I hope that you are encouraged too.