

## Unflinching Faith

A preacher was explaining the difference between faith and knowledge. “Now take the Simpson family, there. She *knows* that the three children sitting with them are hers. He *believes* that the kids are his. That’s faith.” To be frank, I really wonder what that preacher was thinking! But in our scripture lessons this morning, the theme of faith and faithfulness is clearly evident. Psalm 25 relates King David’s prayer and plea to God to save him from his enemies. Genesis 22 records the earth-shaking, unflinching faith of Abraham to actually slay his beloved son of God’s promise. James 1 shows us what real faith is, contrasted by deceptive and ultimately suicidal, beautiful lip service. Finally, in Mark 1, we read his brief summary of the Son of God’s baptism by John, anointing by Holy Spirit, temptation by the devil, and then the beginnings of His gathering of disciples to inaugurate the new age of grace with the preaching of the gospel of repentance to God resulting in eternal life in the very Kingdom of God.

Four scripture passages, three main protagonists, and one teacher exhorting us how to live in accordance with the lessons of the protagonists’ lives. Psalm 25 was written by King David, along with 87 other psalms, and it was none other than King David who organized and systematized the musical worship of

God. It seems that prior to him, the musical aspects of worship were special events, sporadic, rather than the prescribed and elevated place music has had in worship beginning with David and continuing to our own day. Indeed, one of the distinctives of our Lutheran worship here at Gloria Dei are the many responses and prayers that are sung. You may not feel like or think of it in this way, but it's no accident we do it this way. In many ancient Christian worship services, the entire service was sung. We all know intuitively that speaking words is far different than singing them. When people do not speak the prescribed words in worship, let alone sing them, well, are they really worshipping at all? Or, as James mentions in the first chapter of his letter/sermon, is there any genuine faith among such people at all?

While King David is rightly considered by God and man as the absolute greatest of Israel's earthly kings, in many ways he was a tragic figure. It's easy to forget the years he was persecuted by King Saul; on the run day after day after day, trying to stay one step ahead of Saul's forces, to stay alive one more day. And later, after becoming king, his tragic fall into temptation as the visage of a beautiful woman bathing caught his eye as he gazed down on the city below his high palace. He had to have her. An affair. Illicit sex. An unplanned pregnancy. An attempt to make it seem like her husband's ends in total failure. To mop up the mess, he arranged for her husband's murder on the front lines of a battle. With the husband out of the way, David could have the

object of his intense desire, and no one would be the wiser. Except God had seen everything. He always does. Well, the fallout from all that was that “the sword never left the house of David” (II Samuel 12:10). This infant son of David died not long after birth. His other sons from other wives tried to usurp the throne out from under him. Humiliated and reduced to fleeing for his life from the clutches of his own sons, David, it seemed hardly had a moment’s peace. And yet, in spite of all, his faith in God’s love and faithfulness never left. We have the psalms to prove it. And God commends him for it, so much so, that God promised that one of his own future descendants would sit on Israel’s throne in Jerusalem forever and ever. Praise and worship, in music, carries a lot of weight with God!

Mark briefly mentions Lord Jesus’ baptism, but focuses on the most vital, salient moment of that sacred event. Matthew and Luke also record the words of God the Father when the Lord rose up out of the water. Mark 1:10-11 says: ‘the heavenly realm split open, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him like a dove. At the same time, a voice spoke from heaven, saying: “You are My Son, My cherished One, and My greatest delight is in You!”’ The Son of Man was 30 years old now, the age at which all Jewish men became full adults and legal heirs of their father’s house and estate. Their fathers would, in a public ceremony, publicly proclaim the man as their son who now had full authority over the father’s household and estate, representing the entire house in all mat-

ters. With this in mind, we see how this immense meaning was clearly apparent to all those witnessing it. Lord Jesus, the Son of God, now had full authority and now spoke on behalf of Father God, as if He was God, which, indeed, He actually was!

But all of this would not have come about had not David been a faithful psalmist and worshipper of God. And David would not have come about had not someone far more ancient had not proved his faithfulness to God. See how faith in God truly does change the world. Every time! Abraham answered God's leading to leave his homeland and immigrate to an unknown land in the west, known at the time as Canaan. God had promised him and his wife Sarah a son who would be the first of an ever-increasing line of descendants who would become many nations, and particularly, a nation that God would choose for a special purpose: to receive His word and witness to Him throughout the earth and through all ages. But none of that would happen if the son wasn't born. Time passed. Years upon years passed. No son! Well, when it was impossible for a natural baby to be born to aging parents long past the age of child bearing, Isaac was born. For God loves "impossible" situations, for as Gabriel related to Mary, "Nothing is impossible with God" (Luke 1:37). God loves to astound us, turning our preconceptions and worldly certainties on their heads. Isaac was not only born, but grew into a teenager.

Now, God had another assignment for Abraham. Go to Mt. Moriah, we know it today as the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, for

Jerusalem had not yet been built in Abraham's day, and take Isaac and sacrifice him as a burnt offering to God. Well, was that a tall order! It's hard to imagine the anguish that gripped Abraham's soul as he proceeded to obey the voice of God, without hesitation. We can only speculate how he tried to justify it all. Whatever his thinking, the Bible makes it clear that he was both resolute and unflinching in his resolve to follow through on what God had commanded, whatever the consequences.

We read the story again today, and we know that God never intended for Abraham to actually sacrifice Isaac. It was all a test of Abraham's faith. It proved to *Abraham* just how steadfast and unyielding his faith was. More importantly, it provided us, who would live thousands of years in the future, what real, genuine faith looks like. And supremely, it shows what the plan of God was from the very beginning. For as Abraham was about to sacrifice his own son, a ram was provided by God as a substitute. Likewise, God would provide another substitute to be the ultimate sacrifice for our sin and the sin of all people who would accept it, God's very Own Self, in the Person of the Living Word of God, Who became a man, to become the perfect, singular, one and only, once for all time and space, substitute to redeem all creation from sin and death. Yeshua haMashiach, Jesus the Messiah, Jesus the Christ is His name!

As this was a test for Abraham's faith, would we pass a similar kind of test of our faith? Since we are not Father Abraham,

probably not. But not to despair. For our faith is a gift of God. Indeed, it is the Substitute Himself Who plants the seed of faith within us, and as we grow in the wisdom and knowledge of Him, as our lives slowly merge into one new, everlasting life, our faith also grows and is perfected by Him, to the point that our faith will become not only as unflinching as Abraham's but actually surpass his. So much so that we become like Christ Jesus Himself, able to effectively wield His authority delegated to us, for we become His sons and daughters, heirs to His household and estate, namely all earth and Heaven. We can actually speak for Him!

Abraham was an ordinary man, yet extraordinary because of his faith. He made many mistakes along the way, told lies, tried to deceive people, yet, like David in the future, he remained faithful to God, picking himself up and starting again after each failure. So if he was so great and yet so frail and fallible, there is hope for us as well. Actually, we have it better than he did, for Lord Jesus had not yet come upon the earth. Abraham never had the opportunity to invite the life-giving faith and Holy Spirit life of Christ within himself. We do. We just have to do it. We just have to pray it. We just have to get serious with God and ask Him for it in prayer. And this is not just a one-time deal. We have to pray, daily for a new infilling of Holy Spirit. Don't make the mistake of trying to face a new day with all of its difficulties and problems, all by yourself. Why put yourself through unnecessary pain and anguish? Don't! Take the hint from Abraham, David, James, and our Lord!

