

“Faith Walk” based on Genesis 22:1-14 6/26/11

In the OT writing of the prophet Habakkuk, the prophet questions God about how God is governing the world. Ultimately, God answers that he is still sovereign and that in the meantime, the righteous--those who follow God's ways--are called to “live by faith.”

In the NT Gospels, Jesus himself affirmed those who lived by faith: the Roman centurion, who believed that Jesus could heal his servant from a distance, those who lowered the paralyzed man through the roof for Jesus to heal, and the woman with an issue of blood who was healed by touching Jesus' garment, to name a few.

And the Apostle Paul, in II Corinthians tells the Corinthian Christians that as people of God “we walk by faith and not by sight.” The author of Hebrews writes that: “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” And finally, the author of James writes: “Count it all joy, my brothers (and sisters) when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness...”

This past Tuesday Don and I drove to Peace United Methodist Church in Kaukauna, just east of Appleton. We were taking this trip because along with 45 other UM pastors from Wisconsin, I had been nominated to be a part of the trial court pool for the church trial of one of our Wisconsin United Methodist clergy. There at the church, pastors were named to the trial court, were asked questions, were removed from the roster, with more pastors being named and asked questions, with a final naming of 15 pastors taking place for the trial court. And though the steps of the process had been explained to us at the time of our arrival, the 46 of us still found our hearts beating rapidly, as each name was called and we awaited each next step in the process. It was a *faith walk* not only for Don and me, but for all the others who had faithfully responded to the mandate from our Conference Office and the presiding officer, Bishop Clay Lee, to be present--because none of us had had this kind of experience before.

Today's Scripture from Genesis is the story of a faith walk. Occurring very near the beginning of the Bible, it is one of the stories that sets the stage for the stories of faith throughout Scripture. We're alerted right away that God is testing Abraham, saying to him: “Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and offer him as a burnt offering.” And right away we may ask: “What kind of command is this for God to make to anyone, let alone Abraham and Sarah, who in their old age had finally conceived a son named Isaac, who had been promised to them years ago by God himself!”

Yet, if we look at the “Faith Hall of Fame” in the NT book of Hebrews, chap. 11, we read these words of the author as he reflects back on how Abraham and Sarah lived their lives: “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go. By faith he lived as a foreigner in the country that God had promised him...By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore...It was by faith that Abraham, when tested, (was willing to) offer up Isaac...”

Abraham and Sarah lived their lives by faith. And even though they sometimes fell short of doing this, both had received the God-given gift of taking God at his Word--going to a foreign land, living there as foreigners, and finally miraculously giving birth to a son when Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 90. But then a test came into Abraham's life. Would God suddenly take away this long-awaited, only son of theirs? And even

more, what would happen to God's earlier promise to Abraham that God would make of him a great nation, with his descendants being as numerous as the stars in the sky?

Well, what happened next was that early the next morning, Abraham cut some wood for the sacrifice, loads his donkey, and starts out for the place that God had told him about, taking Isaac and two servants with him. On the third day of travel, Abraham saw the place in the distance, and says to the servants. **"Stay here with the donkey. Isaac and I will go over there and worship and then we will come back to you."** The next scene is what you see on your bulletin cover: Abraham takes the wood he had cut and lays it on his son Isaac, while he carries the fire and a knife. And the two of them continue the journey. But Isaac is observant. In his own mind he's thinking: "Isn't something missing here?" When Isaac asks his father where the animal is that will be sacrificed, Abraham replies in the only way he knows how--with a statement of faith: "God will take care of it. God will provide what is needed for the sacrifice." And the two of them journey on.

When they come to the site to which God had directed Abraham, Abraham builds an altar, lays the wood on the altar, binds Isaac, and lays him on top of the wood, and proceeds to do what God had commanded him to do. But just at the critical moment Abraham is interrupted by God's angel. Abraham, who had never hesitated, is willing to obey, but God will not require the life of Isaac, for the angel says: **"Abraham, don't hurt the boy... Now I know that you honor God and seek to obey him, because you have not kept back your only son from him."** When Abraham looks up, he sees a ram caught in the thicket by its horns and offers it up as a burnt offering instead of his son Isaac. And Abraham names this place: *"The Lord will provide."*

What this story in the life of Abraham tells us is that sometimes God may ask us to do things without us fully understanding why--without us being able to see the final outcome of what we are being asked to do. But because we seek to honor God by our obedience to him, we step forward and respond. Abraham was willing to act solely out of his desire to honor and obey God, even when he could not see clearly the logic of the divine command. In doing this, he passed the test, and also discovered a new insight about God, which is that God is present even in situations where we do not clearly see God. And not only is God present, but God's strength and grace are with us as well.

When the 46 of us Conference pastors were nominated to be a part of the trial court pool in Kaukauna, we knew it would not be any easy task for which 15 of us would ultimately be chosen, but we responded in faith, believing that God's strength and grace would be with us. And so it is for all of us--whenever God calls us into a challenging situation, we can rest assured that not only is God present, but his strength and grace will be with us as well. And his will will be fulfilled through our obedience. Amen.