

"NEVER TOO OLD FOR AN ADVENTURE"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
March 19, 1995

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INTRODUCTION

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The explanation given seems a bit ridiculous, for at the age of 40, he was afraid he might be too old to cope with the rigors of an Alaskan winter, which hovers at fifty degrees below zero along the Yukon River. His rule has always been never to write about a place in which he had not lived for some time. Thus he shied away from this undertaking, a challenging one at that, to be sure.

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NEVER TOO OLD FOR AN ADVENTURE

Have you ever felt that way? Some people are never too old for an adventure. We're thinking about Abraham again this morning. Today's scripture lesson as well as last Sunday's text reminds us that Abraham was only 75 when God called him to leave his home and strike out for a land that God would show him. I'm sure he must have had some mixed feelings. No one likes to pack up all of one's earthly possessions and move to a strange place, especially if you're happy where you are.

However, Abraham obeyed God. He packed things up and moved from where he had lived most of his life and set out on a new adventure in faith. He went placing his trust in God not knowing what would happen or where he was going. God called Abraham and he responded. He didn't argue with God about possibly getting someone a bit younger and with more energy in those old bones. Abraham and his wife, Sarah set out on their greatest adventure, stepping out "in faith". He would not only become the father of a great nation as God had promised, but he would also become the "father of faith".

WHAT'S GOING ON

But wait a minute. Hold on here. What's going on? Our scripture lesson isn't from the book of Genesis, it's over there in Romans years and pages from the original Abraham account. We ought to be talking about St. Paul and not Abraham, but what we have here is St. Paul talking about Abraham. Let's take a closer look and see what's up.

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Remember that the Jewish people looked to Moses as the great "Law Giver". Paul here is suggesting a new hero to them whose name is Abraham. He's holding him up as the example of the Christian faith. Paul was arguing that Abraham lived his life by faith, believing in God's promises even though it seemed impossible. Thus Abraham, he tells them, was saved by his FAITH, and not by the LAW. And because of the way he lived his life, Abraham became the father of faith.

FIRST: SIMPLE TRUST

Put this down then, first of all. Faith is a matter of simple trust.

In his first encounter with God, God promises Abraham,

"I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great."

Hey, it's no wonder than that Abraham was willing to pull up stakes and move out. What a promise God was making with him. Abraham - you're going to be a celebrity. I'm going to make you famous. But not only that, but he would have as many descendants as there are stars up there in the sky...more than you can count.

Now all of this was getting a bit "sticky" for remember that Abraham and his wife Sarah were well past child-bearing age. Paul writes of Abraham in verse 19 of chapter four:

"He 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."

Some line. I think he had good reason to question and to doubt God's promise. The only place you ever hear of older couples having babies is on the cover of those super-market tabloids that some of you read. Remember last Fall, reading about the elderly woman, nearly 100 years old, who sued the tabloid for printing her picture and suggesting to the world she was pregnant. She wasn't, needless

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So put this down first, that faith is simple trust. And never forget.... never forget that there is great power at work in simple trust.

Here's a story that's worth sharing and thinking about. Jane McAdams tells us about her 69 year old mother. Her mother lived through the Great Depression of the thirties. And it left its mark on her. She was never extravagant with her spending. Jane's mother was in the hospital where she had been diagnosed with cancer. The afternoon that Jane met with the doctors she was told by them that there was very little hope. And Jane feared the moment when she would have to tell her mother that she was dying. She thought to herself,

"How much does mother know? Does she already know....if not, does she suspect. How much do I tell her...is there anything I can do or say to give her hope?"

Her mother's birthday was approaching and she thought she would buy her mother a new nightgown, something her frugal mother would never have thought to go out and buy for herself. She remembers presenting the gift to her mother and how her mother reacted. After looking at it for some time, she said to Jane:

"Would you mind returning it to the store? I really don't want it..."

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Jane went out and bought the expensive summer purse. She knew her mother well enough to know that, if possible, her mother would never let that purse go to waste. And that was many years ago. The purse is worn out and long gone are at least two or three others. The gift of that purse gave her mother a new sense of hope. Jane's mother just celebrated her 83rd birthday. And Jane bought her....you guessed it...the most expensive designer purse she could find. "She'll use it well" Jane said recently.

ACCEPTANCE OF GOD'S GRACE

Yes, there is indeed great power in trust. And that's where faith begins. Abraham trusted the promises of God and he was not let down or disappointed. He took that "leap of faith" and it made a difference. But there's a second element to faith and that is the acceptance of God's grace. Abraham became the great father of faith, not because he kept the "letter of the Law", but because he lived his life "in faith". I'm sure he was not perfect, by any account and if he depended on his

righteousness to "save" him, he was doomed...as all of us are doomed. "His faith" as Paul tells us, "was reckoned to him as righteousness."

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He was lying in a hospital bed...leg in traction, head swollen beyond recognition, mouth wired, tongue swollen...when his own father told him that Paul's parents wanted to see him. Stan was in pain, not just physical pain, but emotional pain as well....feelings of fear, embarrassment and total forsakeness. Unable to speak, he watched as his aunt and uncle, Paul's mother and dad, came into his room. They came over to his bed...and smiled. He wondered how on earth they could ever smile at a time like this. They took his hand and quietly whispered in his ear, "You're our son now....too, you know." Stan said this later on,

"Those are words I will never forget...for they were not words I deserved nor expected....they were, of course, words of grace....words of grace."

WORDS OF GRACE MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Perhaps you have experienced such grace in your life and if you have, then you know what a difference it can make. I think...if Christ is real in your life, then the chances are that you have. If we had to count on our own "good works"...if we had to depend upon our own righteousness, then all of us would have a pretty hard time "making it". But Paul reminds us here that we don't have to. We're not "doomed". We're people of faith. We've invested our trust in God. We've accepted His grace. He does love us. In spite of all the wrong turns we might make, He still seeks us...forgives us...accepts us. And what a difference this makes in a life.

Perhaps a story will help to dramatize what we need to fully come to grips with. In recent days we have been made aware once again of Anne Frank's Diary and the tragedy of her death in March of 1945 a few weeks before World War II came to an end. It was in connection with that event that the following story was shared. A Dutch pastor and his family got into trouble with the Nazis during the Second World War, hiding Jews to keep them safe from Hitler's SS troops. One night in the darkness, they heard the sound of heavy boots and loud, impatient knocking at their door. Their crime had been discovered. Arrested at gunpoint, they were placed that very night in a cattle car to be taken East to one of the notorious death camps. All night long, they rode in heartbreaking anguish, jostling against one another and the other prisoners who were jammed into the car. They were absolutely terrified. They knew they would soon die in one of Hitler's extermination centers.

Finally, as daylight was breaking, the train stopped. The doors of the cattle cars were opened and they were marched out and lined up by the guards

along the railroad tracks. Family members were looking at one another knowing they would soon be separated and led off to certain death.

In the midst of their gloom, they discovered some news too good to be true. News beyond belief. They discovered, in the brightness of that morning sunlight, that they were not in a death camp at all. In fact, they were not even in Germany, but in Switzerland! During their night of terror, that night of darkness, some courageous and daring person had tripped a switch and sent the train to Switzerland and to freedom. Instead of being sent to a certain death, they were welcomed to new life.

CLOSING

This is the message, I understand, that Paul is trying to communicate in this heavy passage to the Christians gathered in Rome. The wages of sin is death, but new life is there awaiting all who believe on Christ. It's simply a matter of trust. A matter of accepting God's grace as it comes to us in Christ...in His life, in His love. We often speak of it as "a leap of faith". Perhaps you've taken it. Perhaps you haven't. There's still time. It's not too late. And you're never too old for an adventure with Him. And if not here, where? And if not now, when?

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence here in these quiet moments, O God. Wrestle with us in the deep and hidden corners of our lives. Confirm within us the feelings, the decisions, the impulses of these moments in this service this hour, this day. Stretch our natural impulses and lead us to newness of life. Renew our simple trust in Christ, as the Way, the Truth and the Life. Go with us now as we depart. This we ask in His name. Amen.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, March 19, 1995

GREETING / VISITORS

- A. We greet the visitors in the congregation this morning....delighted you're here with us and we hope we shall have the opportunity to... Please...be free in the SHARING of your name with us. FILL out a visitor card....or SIGN one of the Guest Books in the narthex. Come, worship with us....come, work with us in the outreach concerns....
- B. We've been doing the LORD'S WORK at this busy corner of His Kingdom since the year 1837. Last Sunday we celebrated our 158th birthday. Roots of this church are deep in the soil....fourth building out of which this Methodist congregation has worshipped at this site...We like to say that we minister here in the name of Christ and it is in His loving spirit...
- C. Today's coffee hour, as you may have noted, is IN HONOR of recent new friends....many new faces have appeared here many Sundays since last Fall. We invite you to join us downstairs for the coffee hour. Outside of Sunday worship, the coffee hour is a good place to get started in this church...good way to catch something of the spirit of this parish.
- D. Some of you may be here because of a SPECIAL INVITATION from a member of the church....we welcome you, too. Across the years I've been the minister here, I've become more and more aware of how many LONE RANGER CHRISTIANS there are in this city. Getting involved with other Christians in a church like this can make a difference - in your life... as well as in the life of the Church.
- E. Members: be sure to wear your name tags downstairs. Make a point of making some new friends...never know where it may lead...get the name of that person you've been calling "HI"...Who knows?why you may even meet a soulmater with whom to spend the rest of your life....such things have happened here!

PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Parish concerns are in the bulletin. The "Hounds" meet on Tuesday evening at 6:30. Evening prayer opportunity on Wednesday evening at 7 pm with Mr. Bonwitt...here in the sanctuary. Next Sunday is the UMW annual get together to vote on allocating funds from the church Fair. It's not too late to make a birthday gift to the Endowment Fund...for which we are grateful. Next Sunday is the ONE GREAT HOUR OF SHARING appeal...envelopes will be in the pews. Also next Sunday we shall have the Easter Altar flower envelope available for you. Palm Sunday - April 9th - will be confirmation Sunday and also our before church Palm Sunday traditional pancake breakfast.

- B. I share the sad news with you this morning that David Grant Deibler father of Katie and Daniel, husband of Margery, passed away last Sunday morning in NY Hospital. A Memorial Service was held on Tuesday of this week here and the flowers this morning are given in loving memory by his family.
- C. Ann Cavallaro is a patient in Beth Israel Hospital as is Judy Keisman, our Day School Director, a patient in Beth Israel North.

JESUS SAID:

"It is more blessed to give than it is to receive". Let us worship God with our morning offering....

MIDDLE HYMN

- A. Today's middle hymn is in the bulletin....we'll have a good sing... traditional Irish melody...with a loving nod in the direction of those of you who have a bit of Irish blood in your veins...

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