

A NECESSARY INGREDIENT OF LIFE

INTRODUCTION

Someone in our Church remarked to me several weeks ago that it wouldn't be necessary for me to preach a sermon on homecoming Sunday because everyone would be so taken up with the new appearance of things that they probably wouldn't bother to listen to what was being said. I replied that that necessarily wouldn't be a new experience for me. I thought of this person's remark several times this past week when under the hectic pressure of getting things ready for this opening service, it would have been less demanding on my nervous system not to have had this sermon to think about. (Pause....) As I think back on all that's taken place since last I spoke to you from this pulpit, I can't help but have a deep feeling of gratitude not only to God, but also to the men whose combined efforts made all of this possible. I won't take this occasion to mention them by name for I wouldn't want to embarrass them for the world, but all of us owe a great deal to these men of great vision, dedicated leadership and Christian devotion. Coupled with this feeling of gratitude is a lesser feeling of amusement as I think back on some of the things that happened here in connection with this task of decoration. The evening, for instance, when the painters brought their huge piece of equipment into the church. They referred to it as a boom; some of you saw it. For those of you who didn't see this boom I would describe it to you in this fashion; it looked more like a rocket about to be launched to the moon. I've often wondered what those people who gathered on the sidewalk in front of the church one evening at midnight early in the month of August and watched this rather weird piece of equipment being brought in. The next morning one of the painters told me that someone in the crowd had remarked "I heard they had a young minister in that church who never seems to have his feet on the ground anyway". And then of course I shall never forget that Monday afternoon in late August when the power went off all over the city (the boom you see was driven by electrical current) and one of the painters was left literally hanging from the ceiling, and in a steady stream of Spanish, (profane as well as profuse) (it's a good thing I don't understand Spanish) he insisted that someone turn the lights back on and bring him down to the floor. (They tried to squeeze him out through the windows). And then of course I shall never forget this past week when it appeared that we would not be able to finish up in time for this opening service. Somehow we managed to get things done, and get the boom out of here, and get the place cleaned up. The job is 95% complete; one or two minor things remain to be done. I've wondered many times over the past few weeks what happens when a church has to be built from the ground up - all of the decisions that have to be made, all of the personal tastes, and individual idiosyncrasies that have to be considered. Sometimes it's so easy for us in the church to lose sight of the forest for the trees, and I'm so thankful that that has not happened in connection with this project.

Someone else in the church suggested to me earlier this week what perhaps ought to have been the title of this sermon. Their suggestion was: "I Wonder Where the Yellow Went". I gave the title some consideration, really I did; I always like to preach on the topics that you suggest to me, but in this case I just couldn't think of a Biblical situation or text that would fit that title. The closest I could come to it was that line from one of John Wesley's sermons, something about "Cleanliness being next to Godliness". That in itself is worth remembering now that we've gotten things back to the way we'd like them.

However, following the pattern of last Sunday's sermon, I shall once again turn to the Old Testament, to a Story that will introduce us to the underlying theme of this message, and once again, we shall go back, very far back indeed, almost behind the scenes of history to the Story of Abraham.

THE STORY OF ABRAHAM

As the story unfolds, we find Abraham living in Babylonia near the Persian Gulf, just about where the great river Euphrates empties into it, in a city called Ur, in a district of Chaldea. It was one of the cradles of civilization, and in this highly favored place Abraham was born and raised. As far as we know he lived there happily, a member of a large family. His father was still alive, and he had brothers, sisters, inlaws and most precious of all, his lovely wife Sarah.

And then one day, quite suddenly and apparently without any warning, something told him to leave his native land, to leave the familiar setting where he was living happily with his family, to leave this center of civilization with all of its benefits and privileges for himself and for the children he someday hoped to have and move westward to a country that nobody in that part of the world had ever heard of, and there to start a new way of life and to be the founder of a new nation. The writer of the Book of Genesis put it in these words: "The Lord said to Abraham, 'Get thee out of thy country and from thy kindred and I will make of thee a great nation.'"

On the surface it sounds like one of those preposterous promises, woven out of pure fantasy, with no possibility of fulfillment. Abraham's family must have thought that he was slightly unbalanced and even we who know the final outcome of this story find it difficult to imagine Abraham making this great decision, whether to go or to remain. If he remains, he will have security with the danger of stagnation. If he goes, he will have danger and uncertainty along with the possibility of fulfillment. Not an easy decision for him to make; not an easy decision for any man to make. Some of you I know have had to make such decisions; I suppose there comes a time in the life of every man when he has to make such a decision.

Imagine if you can, a modern American giving Abraham some advice at this point. It might run something like this:

"If I were you Abraham, I'd stay right where you are. Things may not be perfect there, but this is one of the garden spots of the world. You've got plenty to live on - you've got a wife, your father is still living. Your roots are here and they go down very deep. You've got security and safety here, and that's something to think about. And don't forget this - you know nothing about the country you've been told to go to. What if your wife doesn't care for it. You better hold on to what you've got. A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. You're not as young as you once were. You can't take the rough spots like you once could. You say God has told you to do this. How can you be sure it was God. How do you know it wasn't an escape mechanism. How do you know you are sub-consciously running away from some unpleasant experience. My advice to you would be to stay right where you are. Don't start off at your age on any wild goose chase. You have nothing to gain

practically everything to lose."

Of course, we have no way of knowing whether anyone ever offered Abraham such advice. Probably not, although it could have happened. Human nature hasn't changed that much across the centuries. We Americans are not quite as modern as we think we are. Most of our rationalizations are as old as the hills and caution is something that's been built right into the structure of human personality. But the point of course is this: if he did hear it, if he did listen to it, he listened with a deaf ear. You might say that while the man was busy talking to him, giving him all this advice, Abraham was busy packing his suitcases, and getting his family together for the long trip westward. I can't help but think of something that happened in my own household a few years ago, three years as a matter of fact, just about this time of year. My wife and I were faced with the decision of leaving a small suburban town in upper New York state and a thriving church to come to this thriving city and a church that wasn't thriving. The DS stepped by one afternoon to talk to us about the great opportunities that this church offered, and as it came time for him to leave, he said, "But remember Phil. It's got to be your decision. No one can make it for you. I've told you what I'd do. I think it's something you'll have to think about carefully with your wife and together the two of you will have to give it prayerful consideration". As we stood by the door he remarked "I'm sorry I didn't get to see your wife....sorry she wasn't home". And then without thinking, I replied "Oh she's home. She just busy upstairs packing her suitcase."

And so Abraham and his wife and family left the familiar streets of Ur and headed west and north to an unknown land. As the Bible says: "Abraham went out, not knowing whither he went". We pause and wonder why he did it? Was he unhappy where he was? Nothing in the story that would indicate he was. Was he trying to escape from a situation he didn't want to face up to? We have no way of knowing; the story doesn't indicate anything like that. Was he anticipating the 20th century desire to always be on the move? Probably not. HE DID IT BECAUSE GOD TOLD HIM TO DO IT. AND GOD PROMISED HIM THAT GREAT THINGS WOULD COME OF IT IF HE DID IT. He believed that promise. He believed that promise because he trusted completely the person who had made that promise. And because he trusted that person, he had faith. And faith, as you know, is nothing more than confidence in the future which is based upon a trust in a person.

FAITH: A NECESSARY
INGREDIENT OF LIFE

And here we come to the very heart and core of this morning's message. Faith is a necessary ingredient in the life of any person. We need desperately this confidence in the future which is based upon a trust in a person. With faith we can do so much; without it we can do so very little. Most of us, on the one hand, are familiar with this word. We've been exposed to this word "faith" ever since we first started going to church, and yet on the other hand this word is strangely unfamiliar to us. With it the doors of life swing open; without it the doors of life remain shut. Some people look upon faith as something unreal, silly and impractical, but actually it is the most practical down to earth thing we have and all of us have it and use it in varying degrees.

For instance this morning I got up around 6:30 (a minister has to get up early on a Sunday morning. We can sleep in the other six mornings of the week because we only work one day a week). Anyway it was dark when I got up and so I turned on the light. I had faith that the electricity would come through. I then stumbled into the kitchen and

put some water on for coffee. I had faith that the city authorities had had prepared it for drinking; that it was pure, and I didn't take time to analyze it. I took a hot shower. I had faith in the superintendent of the building that he would have hot water in the pipes for my shower. (Sometimes my faith in him is stretched especially when he takes Sunday morning to repair the boiler figuring I guess that everyone sleeps in on Sunday morning). My wife could have put poison in my breakfast and I suspect that there were times this past week when she was tempted to do this, but I had faith in her and went ahead and ate my bacon, eggs and fried tomatoes. You see my point. This daily business of life is a matter of faith. I could give you other examples. For instance getting married is a matter of faith. It takes a lot of faith in some instances. It took a lot of faith on my part to make such an adventure with only one hundred dollars to see me through. It took a great deal of faith, too, for my bride to leave the south and come north to a cold climate to a little town in upper New York state where the snow drifts often pile up to five and six feet high. It takes a lot of faith too, in each other, to stay happily married. It took faith for us to leave that little town in upper New York State and come south to assume the spiritual leadership of this church. I can't help but smile as I think back on some of the things that happened when we first came here. Some of my seminary friends accused me of taking this church because of its proximity to Yankee Stadium. That wasn't so, especially after the way they let me down this past season. And then I remember too when we met with the pastoral relations committee of this church, and during the course of our conversations together I asked the lay leader of the church what kind of services the people of this church preferred, and with great insight and with that wonderful sense of humor that all of us have come to love, he replied "Well I think most of the people would prefer a short service".

Remembering his remark then, let me begin to bring things together by suggesting to you that faith in God, faith in ourselves, and faith in others is necessary if we hope to accomplish anything in life. With faith we can do a great deal; without it there is so little that we can do. "All things are possible to him who believes". Remember it was Jesus who made that great assertion. Faith, the size of a mustard seed, he said, can juggle mountains the way a juggler might handle a ball. Everything is possible to the person who has faith in the presence, the power, the purposes and the plans of Almighty God.

There are thousands of people in the world today who are facing new situations, and for all I know some of them may be here this morning. There are people who are facing serious complications in their own personal lives. There are people who are struggling with great temptations. Let me say this to all of you, but particularly to those of you whose present life situation may be causing you great anxiety at the moment. Don't overlook the power of a faith in the kind of God that Jesus revealed to us. It's a source of power you can't afford to overlook. I cannot stand before you this morning and say that faith in God will excuse you from all of the heartaches, the headaches, the problems, frustrations and disappointments of life, but I can say this that if you take time to cultivate this most important relationship of life, a relationship with God, you will find greater faith and confidence in yourself which will help you to handle the problems of life, and you'll find too that you have greater faith in others, and all this in turn will enable you to meet life head on, victoriously.

And so as we begin another year together, it is my hope and prayer that as we come together every Sunday morning in this beautiful and

breathless place of worship, that the measure of faith you need in your own life will be supplied to you as you hear the Word of God proclaimed from this pulpit, as you listen to the choir lift its voice in praise to Almighty God, and as you come and sit quietly in this sacred House of God. Open your hearts, your minds, and let your faith grow through this worship experience and let it lead you on to the great and glorious things of life. As it does, You'll find what Abraham discovered centuries ago, and what Jesus proclaimed in Galilee that with faith in God, all things are again and again made possible.

Lord, give me faith! - to live from day to day,
With tranquil heart to do my simple part,
And, with my hand in thine, just go thy way.

Lord, give me faith! to trust, if not to know;
With quiet mind in all things thee to find,
And child-like, go where Thou wouldst have me go.

Lord, give me faith! - to leave it all to thee,
The future is thy gift, I would not lift
The veil Thy love has hung 'twixt it and me.

John Oxenham.

LET US PRAY:

Lead us, Our Father, from this hallowed place safely back to those places from whence we have come. As we face new situation, serious complication and great temptations, may the memory of Abraham and how he went forth, not knowing where he was going, may that example help us on our way. May our faith be strong enough to make a difference in the final outcome. Amen