

SERMON FOR THE SUNDAY REMINISCERE

(Cape Town - 17 February 2008)

Text: ⁸ By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. ⁹ By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. (Heb.11:8-10)

It is very easy to determine the central topic of this particular sermon text. It is all about “faith”. In fact, the words “by faith” form a repetitive pattern that characterizes the whole of Hebrew, chapter 11. The author introduces to us various well-known people in the Bible and then by their lives demonstrates to us what “faith” is all about. In verse 4 we read: ***“By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did”***. Verse 5: ***“By faith Enoch was taken from this life without experiencing death”***. Verse 7: ***“By faith Noah, when warned by things not yet seen, built an ark.”*** And then follows our sermon text, which is all about Abraham’s faith.

“Faith” is a very central word for us Christians. In the Reformation of the Church in the 16th century it became the flip-side of the “deeds” that people were called on to do in order to obtain eternal life. So when the church of that time said: “In order to get forgiveness or to be saved, you first need first need to fulfil certain obligations”, the Reformers responded by saying: “No, we live by *faith* alone. God is a gracious God and by *faith* (by faith alone) we receive this divine grace.”

But I must confess, even for a Lutheran pastor there is sometimes great difficulty in understanding what faith is all about.

When I was much younger, I always thought that faith was something that “kicks in” when my intellect has reached its limit. In other words, faith is something I need when I have no natural explanation for a phenomenon.

Let me give you an example: If I had some kind of an illness and modern day medical science had a natural explanation what was happening to me and also provided me with the remedies to get well, then obviously I didn’t need faith to experience healing.

But if in contrast I had an illness, where medical science had reached its limit, where there was no natural explanation, then obviously in such a case faith was desperately needed to provide healing.

With this understanding of “faith” I used to read my Bible. And when something was difficult to explain, or seemed to be extraordinary, that is, out of the “supernatural”, then I obviously I needed “faith” to believe those stories.

In this way, just to give you one example, I always used to read the story about the manna and quails in the desert. I loved that story. The Israelites are travelling through the desert to the promised land. They are desperate for food and have nothing to eat. But in this dire situation, Moses calls on them just to trust God. They set up their tents in the desert. And one morning

when they wake up, they can't believe their eyes. The desert is full of birds. And behold, they can actually catch the birds. It is quite supernatural. The next day the story repeats itself and the next day again.

And then as a 23 year old I study theology. As I do, I make this rather disturbing discovery that this whole bird story wasn't so "supernatural" after all. In fact it was quite natural. It was a natural migration phenomenon. Annually these quails migrated from the East to the West and due to the distance travelled, these birds were inevitably forced to rest in the desert. And far too tired to run or to fly away, they were caught - not only by desert nomads, but jackals as well.

It shocked me and shook my faith to the core. Suddenly I didn't need "faith" to believe this stories anymore. There was a natural explanation for something I always thought to be supernatural. So, good-bye to "faith". I felt a bit like a fool, betrayed by the Bible.

But the problem was not "faith" nor was it "God" who indeed graciously supplied his people with food. The problem was *my understanding* of what "faith" is. And I hope I can rid you today of an understanding of faith that says: "Faith kicks in whenever something cannot be described naturally or scientifically."

The introductory statement I would like to make is this: Faith describes a *relationship between two people*. Faith is no a belief in certain "things" that happen. It is a trust between people.

Let me use my wife and our marriage as an example. You see what draws Maggi und myself to one another, is not that we can outperform each other with supernatural deeds leading to great excitement and admiration for one another. In fact our life is very ordinary. Sometimes we have moments of great joy, and sometimes we cry together. Sometimes we register success, quite often, however, we need to deal with failures. But we have "faith" in one another. And faith in our relationship means: We will not leave each other. In difficult times, we will stand together. Nobody is just going to run away. We will support one another and be there for one another, no matter what comes. That is "faith" and it happens between two people. It describes relationship.

In our text it describes the relationship between God and a man called Abraham. This relationship starts with a "call" from God. One day Abraham hears God calling him. The Bible does not describe in what way this calling happened. Did Abraham hear an audible voice? Or was it just something he sensed in his heart? We don't know. But there was a call.

And this "call" happens time and time again. One day I just know, God is speaking to me. I just sense: This is the direction He wants to lead me. This is what He wants me to do.

In Abraham's case the call was: ***"Leave your country, your people, and your father's household, and go to the land I will show you"*** (Gen.12:10) - "the land you will inherit". It is a call to "let go" and "to follow". It is a call to commit your life to God, although the details of your journey are not known. And the "miracle" is, Abraham followed God: I will not worry about money, I will not worry about the family I am leaving behind, I will not worry about the future. I am just going to obey God and trust his call! That is "faith"

I am quite sure “you” have heard this call as well. It is not a matter of something kicking-in if and when my intellect fails to explain it, when I have experienced something supernatural.

Faith is a relationship. And it is a relationship that remains in tact, no matter what happens. Doesn't Jesus say to Thomas: **“Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed”** (John 20:29)? Blessed are those who walk with me although nothing supernatural happens! And in many ways that is exactly what characterised Abraham's life. God promised him a country he would inherit. And he followed God. But when he arrived in Canaan, life was rather normal. We read, he and his family lived in tents, as did his son and his grandson, Isaac and Jacob, later on. They never had a (double story) house. In the promised land Abraham lived **“like a stranger in a foreign country”**. I can imagine, that many things didn't make sense to Abraham. But he followed God. He committed his life to him.

How is that possible? How can you just follow God when there is a total lack of divine signs, or supernatural miracles confirming his presence? How is that possible?

The answer is: Whenever it happens, it is a miracle. Faith is a miracle. Whenever people follow God without seeing, without experiencing the sunny side of life, then that is a miracle. When people follow God, because something extraordinary happened, that is not really faith. Faith is this miracle of God when people just obey his Word and follow his calling.

Abraham is an example of this. Every day life - with ups and downs! But he trusted God.

Now, the author of this letter to the Hebrews wants to encourage us to trust God as well. But is there a call, like Abraham had? Is there a promise that God has made to me? Yes, there is.

The promise is: “There is a land for you. It is your inheritance.” You may say: “A land! What land?” It is up there, in heaven. And do you know who bought that land for you? It was Jesus Christ, the Lord. He paid on the cross for this land. When he died, he opened the door. And when he was resurrected he said: “Follow me. Through my Spirit I will lead you to that promised land”.

“But I don't see anything”, you say. “Please perform a miracle, so that I can believe you.” And God says: “You don't need a miracle. It is an unbelieving generation that asks for miracles. Just follow me. Every day when you get up, just trust me.” You say to God: “Please, strengthen my faith”. He says: “That is what I am busy with. Whenever my people gather and listen to my word, I strengthen them.”

Faith is not something “I do”. It flows out of a relationship. Faith is not something that kicks-in when my intellect has no explanation. It is *trust* between two people. And true faith is not the result of some supernatural miracle. But I find faith, for example, when a man's house burns down. And seeing his house and all his possessions burning, he starts to sing song. He sings: “Oh, that I had a thousand voices to praise my God with thousand tongues”. That is faith.

May God work this faith also in our lives. Amen.