

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd
Lent 2
March 17, 2019

Believe the Promise
Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18
Luke 13:31-35

What are the marks of a Christian? What are those distinctive qualities that set Christians apart from other people in the world? That general and theoretical question becomes very personal and very important as we consider how we live our own lives. What must I do and be? How can I give witness to the faith that is within me? How can I respond to Christ and what Christ has done for me?

On this second Sunday in Lent we are going to be talking about believing. Our two scripture readings talk in different ways about believing. The first is about the ancestor of the Hebrew people. Abraham, the Bedouin man who had no home and no land. All he had were flocks and the herds that he followed across the Middle East. That and a promise. He had some sheep some goats and a promise. The promise was the promise of God that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky and the promise that one day his people would possess the land. At the time of our scripture lesson, at the portion of Abraham's life that was read to us, Abraham had neither land nor descendants, but he did have one thing and that was belief in the promise of God.

In our Gospel lesson we find Jesus, late in his public ministry, hearing that Herod is threatening him. That threat would not be an idle threat; Herod was a very powerful man. This was the Herod that, not long before had chopped off John the Baptist's head. When the word comes to Jesus that Herod is out to get him, Jesus does not run and hide. He continues with his work, believing that his mission to care for the sick and the hungry and to bring good news to the poor, that his mission was too important to abandon just because of the threat of some puppet king, powerful as he might be. We see Jesus believing that his mission was too important to abandon even in the face of threats.

Each in its own way, each of these two lessons is about believing, and we will return to Abraham and to Jesus before we are done this morning. But as we think about the marks of the Christian life – qualities and traits that people should see in us, and as we think about what we are to believe, there are many things that could be said. This morning there are just a few.

If we are to have in our lives the marks of the Christian life, I think we must first of all believe in God's unconditional love and acceptance. Every human being has a hunger for love and acceptance. Everyone wants to belong. Everyone wants to feel as if someone loves them. Everyone wants to feel as if they are accepted. Everyone wants to have somewhere in life where they are welcomed, no matter what. We see sometimes in others the extreme lengths that some people will go to be accepted. We talk with teenagers about the problems of peer pressure, and the powerful motivation of wanting to be loved. People strive for success to prove their basic value and worth.

But those with the marks of Christ upon us know that we are already loved and accepted. We are already valued and affirmed. We are loved and accepted just as we are. It is true, in one very profound sense, that when we come in the doors of the church, we leave at the door our money, our success, our talents, our abilities, and our accomplishments. We leave it all at the door, because none of it is needed to enter. None of it is required of us because we are already loved and accepted before anything else. Now that does not mean that there is not a place for our money, our talent, and our success, our energy and our time in the life of our Christian journey. But none of them are admission prices. None of these things are preconditions for God's absolute love and acceptance.

Pastor Bill Welch tells of a time when he was preached to while he was preaching. It seems that in his congregation there was a couple who had a young child who was subject to very violent and painful seizures. Often the father and the child would come to church, and it was the father's practice to hold the little child in his arms. One particular Sunday, in the middle of worship, indeed in the middle of the sermon, the child was racked by a horrible seizure, and the father got up. He carried the child to the back of the sanctuary, and there he stood still, just rocking the child as the child went through the extremity of his seizure.

As the preacher was trying to preach and watching this drama going on in the back of the church, Bill Welch said that suddenly he realized, in that moment while he was preaching, that he was being preached to.

He heard God speaking to his heart saying, “That is the way I love you, through all of your imperfections.” No matter what, no matter how beautiful or not so beautiful we may be, no matter how good or not so good our path of life may be, no matter what, God loves us. We do not have to achieve or earn or accomplish. We do not have to make money or be successful. The marks of the Christian life begin with this, believing that nothing in life or death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Believing. First of all, we believe in God’s unconditional love. But secondly, I would suggest today that if the marks of the Christian life are to be upon us, we are to believe that God has a purpose for our lives. I don’t know how many of you have read Rich Warren’s book, *“The Purpose Driven Life.”* He says, your life has a place and a purpose in God’s plan for the world. Our Scripture lessons point to this. Abraham was in his old age, childless and landless, his life seeming to be going nowhere. But the promise of God was that God was going to make of him a mighty nation.

Even for this landless, childless, old man, Abraham there was a purpose. In the Gospel lesson, even in the face of Herod’s threat to Jesus, Jesus’ mission was still there calling him to bring good news to the poor and recovery of sight to the blind and liberty to the oppressed. This mission, this purpose, this reason that God put him there was more important than the threats of Herod.

I want to say to you this morning that the God who loves you loves you so much that God also has a purpose for your life. No matter your age or your station in the world, God has a purpose for you. Your life has a goal, a direction, one that you may not yet have perceived, but somewhere in God's great plan for the world there is a place for you. There is a mission for you. There is a calling for you.

One of the greatest works of spirituality of the twentieth century is the journal of the former Secretary General to the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld. His journal was published under the simple name *Markings*. In his journal, Hammarskjöld once wrote,

"I do not know who or what put the question, I don't know when it was put, I don't even remember answering, but at some moment I did answer 'yes' to someone or something and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that therefore my life, in self-surrender, has a goal."

Your life has a goal. You are not an accident. You are here for a reason. And the One who could create the furthest reaches of the universe has a job for you, has a place for you, has a purpose for you. Believing.

Finally, I would suggest that the marks of the Christian life, these marks of believing, invite you to believe that God can accomplish God's purpose in you. What must Abraham have thought, well into his nineties and still childless, when the message comes to him that he would be the Father of nations? He must have thought that, somehow, he did not meet the criteria anymore.

Perhaps, Jesus, feeling threatened by Herod, might also have felt that his mission was beyond him. Some of you, when you began to get a glimmer of what God intended for your life, may have thought there were too many obstacles, too many barriers, that you were too weak, too small, too young, too old, too poor, too busy. But I invite you to believe in that to which God has called you, that great purpose for which you were born. God can, through you, fulfill that purpose. Perhaps the only real barrier to the fulfillment of God's purpose in your life may be your lack of faith that God can do it and that you and God together can accomplish that purpose.

In this Lenten season, I invite you to believe with all your heart that you are loved unconditionally and accepted by God. I invite you to believe that you were born for some great and good purpose and with God's help that purpose can be accomplished.

Amen!!