
Second Sunday in Lent
Year A

Genesis 12:1-4a
Psalm 121
Romans 14:1-5, 13-17
John 3:1-21

Believe

One of my family's favorite movies in recent years is a movie simply called, "The Lego Movie." The basic premise of the movie is driven by the bad guy, Lord Business, and his desire to control all of the Lego civilization by making sure that everyone stayed in their intended design and position - there was no room for creativity, no mixing up the pieces, no deviating from the plan - a place for everything and everything in its place. To ensure that things stayed in their places Lord Business had a super weapon, the Kragle, [spoiler alert] which was superglue to ensure that no one messed with things!

But there was an underground group of "Master Builders" who opposed Lord Business, people capable of building anything from their imaginations without the need of instructions. They could create on the fly and weren't bound simply by someone else's plan. Within this group of Master Builders there existed a prophecy from a wizard named Vitruvius about someone who was to come whom they called "The Special", the one who would find the "Piece of Resistance", a tool capable of stopping Lord Business and his diabolical plan.

The movie centers in on a character named Emmet who is believed to be The Special despite much evidence to the contrary because of his lack of abilities to be creative and build without instructions. It is believed that Emmet is The Special, but then Vitruvius confesses that the prophecy about The Special was all made up - there wasn't a special person that was to be looked for. Vitruvius explains that the twist is that "the only thing anyone needs to be special is to believe that you can be." He goes on to say that "I know that sounds like a cat poster but it's true." ... And here is that cat poster.

"Believe!"

Take a leap of faith like this kitten. Reach for the stars! Strike out and live your dreams. Don't let anyone keep you down. Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps. You can do it! I could go on and on ...

This makes for great movies and if we're honest the premise of overcoming adversity through believing in yourself is making companies like Disney and other movie studios millions and millions of dollars each year. And it's not just in children's movies. (But I digress.)

Let me be clear, I am not disparaging these storylines and the movies that use them. Positive self-esteem is a good thing. Perseverance is a quality that I want to instill in my children. Grit and being able to stand up in the face of adversity can be a mark of integrity and character. So, don't get me wrong. But something struck me this week when I heard this line, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." (Romans 4:3, 22; cf. Genesis 15:6) And I felt like I was staring at something massive and ground-shifting, and I couldn't take my eyes off of it.

"Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness."

And suddenly this cat poster came screaming into my memory and it was like I was putting on a pair of special glasses and suddenly the things of this world came into clearer view. And it came down to one question. Who do I believe? Who do I believe in?

Because when we first meet Abraham in the book of Genesis we know absolutely nothing about him. A friend and I are reading through the Bible together and when we got to Genesis 12, when we first meet Abraham, this friend of mine said, "Where's the character development? Where's the backstory? Who is this guy?" And my friend was right. In one respect we know nothing about Abraham before he is dropped into the story of God. But in another respect we are immediately told everything that we need to know about Abraham - he believed - and for that he was counted as righteous. Abraham was locked into God before Abraham even uttered a word or made any action.

And that left me a little cornered. Do I believe God like that? I found myself thinking about some questions?

If God says to do something, do I believe him and do it?

If God says not to do something, do I believe him and not do it?

But we need to pause here for just a second and make sure that we are properly understanding what it means to believe. It can be easy to think that to believe means to intellectually trust the accuracy of something - to use my brain to determine the truth. And if that is how we define believing then we are leaving the definition incomplete and potentially actually misleading because that definition leaves me in control of the truth - whether or not I believe it.

In a life of faith to believe is less about our brains and more about our hearts. But when I say 'heart' I'm obviously not talking about the muscle pumping blood through our bodies, but rather, I'm talking about something much more. Because when the Bible talks about our hearts it is actually talking about our whole person. It's talking about every aspect of what makes each of us who we are. Our heart is the central and defining element of who we are as individual human being. The great theologian Karl Barth says that, "the heart is not merely *a* but *the* reality of man, both wholly of soul and wholly of body."

Therefore, when I suggest that believing is a heart issue, not a head issue, and when I suggest that a biblical understanding of our hearts is to understand it to mean the very definition of who we are, then believing is something that envelopes our totality in a manner like nothing else. So when Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness it was a total choice his whole being choosing God first, placing his faith in God, abandoning everything to trust God. It didn't make any cognitive sense, but it made heavenly sense because Abraham believed God.

The danger that surrounds us every day is that we will subscribe to the notion that I can believe in myself over and above God; that I can trust my estimation of things to be more trustworthy than His. And that is simply not how faith works.

And so, today we aren't presented with intricate theology. This isn't a sermon meant to turn a quick phrase to inspire grand insight. What we have today is really the baseline question of Christianity. Do we believe? And do we believe with something more than our minds and do we believe in something bigger than ourselves? That was the challenge of Nicodemus. Nicodemus *knew* it all and Jesus said, "I know you think you know it all, but do you believe in something bigger than your understanding. Do you believe God so deeply in the essence of who you are that this deep-seated belief would actually draw you into such a radically different existence that it is as if you were being born all over again - new life!

Do you believe?

What would it look like to believe God with your whole being - with your whole heart?

What would it look like in your family?

What would it look like with your friends?

What would it look like in your marriage?

What would it look like in your workplace?

What would it look like in your politics?

What would it look like in how you spend your money?

What would it look like in how you spend your time?

What would it look like in what movies or TV shows we watch?

What would it look like with the things that grieve your heart in this world?

What would it look like with the things that inspire you?

What would it look like with the things that bring you joy?

Do you believe? Because for Abraham it birthed righteousness, for Nicodemus it meant new life, and with Jesus it means our salvation - it means life, and life eternal - never ending.

Do we believe? May our answer be yes. *Amen.*