

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

June 8<sup>th</sup> 2008

Hosea 5: 15-6: 6 Psalm 50:7-8 Romans 4:13-25 Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

The Righteousness of Faith

The scripture readings this morning are rich with passages that inspire our hope and faith. You will hear me quoting many of them, especially at the end of this sermon. We see how Abraham hoped against hope and trusted the promises of God. The promise of God for him was that his descendents would be as numerous as the stars - and there he was about 100 years old and then Sarah was, barren. Back in the Greek it says, "Her womb was dead."

But Abraham believed the promise of his Creator God, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. To carry that verse further, Yes, God gives youth back to the aged and makes what is old new again.

That Abraham believed God, God reckoned to him as righteousness. He certainly was a sinner, just like Sarah also was. Remember how she later treated Hagar? She was heartless when she did that. But the righteousness of faith is a very wonderful thing. Even though, almost, but not quite, because we are sinful, God gives us the gift of the righteousness of Christ, makes us righteous by the forgiveness of our sins.

When we believe the promises of God for us, we can be wanting, we can be hopeless, we can be hapless, hopeless or hapless as we may,

but God gives us an integrity from on high. He might have torn us in His wrath, but turning to Christ, God heals us again. God revives our dead souls, transforms us into one of his disciples, fashions us into his servants, so that we share the marvelous Gospel, the marvelous good news of Christ with others.

The righteousness of faith that we receive from on high is really the power of God beginning to work among us.

But the righteousness of faith is not something that we can have. If we identify as righteous, then like that old angel, the angels of righteousness pass over us. We need to be slain by the Word of the Lord, realizing that we are full of sin, we are God's disappointments. But because we believe in God's promises, God raises us up, straightens us out, fills us with gracious strength and prepares us for the mission God has placed before us. Thus we are no longer God's disappointments. The righteousness of faith transforms us into the apples of God's eye, the precious children of God, the saints in light, the heirs of God's divine attributes.

So let us place ourselves solidly among the sinners, let's identify with the lowly and the outcasts, and hope against hope for the marvelous righteousness of faith.

Jesus did not look for a holy person to call. Jesus went to Matthew, a hated tax-collector. I'll say, we do not like IRS people very much even today. He was like a rich lawyer, people love to hate. Or like the police officer who has to evict people from their homes

after this horrible spree of foreclosures. They have to put old women into the street and they know they have no place to go.

Now a rabbi was not to touch a woman. Rabbis had to stay away from the unclean. But the next thing we hear is about Jesus helping a woman whose blood flowed for 12 years. Now how was a holy Rabbi like Jesus supposed to become a gynecologist? But Jesus heals the woman, as she touches the hem of his garment. Now we hardly dare mention even today, out loud, that women have periods. But Jesus does not shirk helping a woman whose period will not stop. And by the power of God, Jesus heals her.

Then he illustrates the righteousness of faith, believing that his Father, who made all the promises to Abraham could really raise the dead. He gets up and follows the leader of the synagogue, whose daughter has just died. He gets up immediately, just like Matthew got up and followed the Lord of Life, immediately. In the righteousness of faith, hoping against hope, he goes right into a funeral in progress. The mourners are already wailing to the tunes of the flute players, and Jesus says something completely untrue: "Go away for the girl is not dead but sleeping." That is because the Lord of Life lived in the power of the One, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Jesus says, "Talitha, cummi!" "Daughter, I say to you, get up!" and the little girl awakens out of death, as if she was sleeping, and Jesus returns her to her father.

You see God's work and Word so powerfully alive in Jesus and the Gospels of the New Testament. But it is the same in the Old Testament. Abraham was almost 100 years old and as good as dead and Sarah was beyond her menopause and was also barren on top of that, and hoping against hope, trusting God, she became pregnant and bore the son of promise, Isaac. That name means "laughter." When the angels told Abraham, that upon their return in the following year, Sarah would have borne a child, she laughed in the tent. They said, "Why does Sarah laugh?" she answered, "I didn't laugh." But she did. Well she had Isaac, and God had the last laugh.

The righteousness of faith is not only powerful in the New and Old Testaments, but also in the testament of our lives. I have to confess that I had a difficult childhood. I lisped horribly and I always walked bent over, so my father was sure I'd be a hunch back. By the grace of God the lisp went away and I take pains especially at communion to walk straight, because God has straightened me out. It has taken God much longer, I have to admit, to make me half-way mature. But as with you, I'm sure, God is not finished with me yet.

Often God takes us to our very edge so that we learn how to hope against hope, how to feel our lostness without God, how to identify with sinners, so that the righteousness of faith can set our hearts right with God. We have to come to the point that we realize we are all beggars before God. He may have given away millions, but even Ed McMahon, is facing the foreclosure of his mansion. We have to realize

that we are living by the grace of God and if God should turn away, we would die.

But we love to put ourselves in the place of God and feel that God depends on us, that God needs us, that God is a concept we have come up with, and that we have made God in our own image. Feeling high and mighty that way and filled with self-righteousness, we try to look around for other people, whom we can call sinners. We want to be superior to them. We want to be the righteous and look down on all those sinners. We might not say, like that old Pharisee, "Thank God I am not like that tax-collector," but we do say, "Thank God I'm not one of those undocumented immigrants!" or what have you. In those days men used to pray, "Thank God I was not born a woman!"

How is God going to lift someone up who is all the way at the top? How do you preach hope to those who have already arrived? How do you teach someone who already knows everything? How do you forgive a person who does not believe they are a sinner? How can the righteousness of faith fill someone who is full of self-righteousness? What room is there in someone's heart, when they are full of themselves?

Over at Christ Lutheran Church in El Cerrito, where we have been worshipping, a few Sundays ago the organist vibrated the floor pedals of his powerful organ in such a way that it sounded like an earthquake, meanwhile, the verse of the hymn that we were singing was all about an earthquake. That put us in our place. When an earthquake

hits, we suddenly realize how small, inadequate, and thrown upon the mercy of this great earth and the Creator of it, we really are.

We are so limited. We are so vulnerable. We victimize each other so much. Come let us return to the Lord for his gracious righteousness of faith. For He has torn, but He can heal us; struck us down, but will bind us up. After two days He will revive us and on the Third day, He will raise us up that we may live before our God. Hosea continues, "Let us press on to know the Lord!" We receive the righteousness of faith from the One who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over for our transgressions and was raised up for our justification.

We are down here in a constant struggle. We're in the thick of it and we're not above it. We're not God and winning the lottery won't make us into God. Let God be God. For our God is a wonderful God, upon whom we call in the time of trouble and God says, "Yes I am your God! Call upon me in time of trouble, I will answer you and you shall glorify me!" Thus we pray, "Dear God, fill us with your righteousness of faith, for without it we are nothing. Amen.