

reSTART: 3. A Matter of Trust
Genesis 12:1-3; Genesis 15:4-6
September 24, 2017
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Everything has a starting point, including faith. Most of us have grown up in a home where faith was present. You went to church, prayed at mealtime or you went to Sunday School; somewhere in childhood, someone talked to you about faith. But there came a point when you seemed to outgrow that faith, and what you were taught didn't match the things you experienced. You had a test on Monday and maybe you didn't study, but you were told if you ask God, God would help you – and then you failed the test. Or, you saw injustices and tragedies and you wondered how a good and loving God could allow such things to happen. So, you walked away, or if you didn't walk away, you stopped thinking about faith. Maybe you continued going to church because that just what you did. It became your way of connecting with people and supporting causes that matter.

I've wondered, what would it look like to start or to start over with an adult starting point for faith? That's what this series is about. Each message in this series is meant to build on the one before it. It's like trying to connect the dots; we need all the dots to create the picture of faith. So, if you missed either of the past two weeks, I hope you will go online and listen. This is the third part in this series, and today, I want to focus on the starting point of faith. Where did faith itself originate? And the three largest faith traditions, Judaism, Islam and Christianity all agree. It was one God who created the universe. God created humanity, and all three say that humanity messed up what God intended. God created a perfect world, but when humans started making decisions, they messed things up. And all three religions agree that when God began to correct a world gone wrong, he started with a man named Abraham. At that point the three religions take different directions, but they all agree faith began with a man named Abraham. So, this morning, I want to focus in on a conversation between God and Abraham that touches on a tension that you have felt. It might even be a place where you struggle today. If there is a God, can God hear me? Does God even care? How can I trust that God is? When God saw what a mess there was on this planet, God had a choice. And that choice reminded me of an experience that I had many years ago.

The summer before my senior year in college I bought a car. Until that point, I attended a college where cars were not permitted without a good reason, and only in my senior year did I have a good reason. I would be student teaching in Eden Prairie schools and living with a friend's family in Minnetonka. I also had a girlfriend at that time whose family also lived in Minnetonka, and one day I drove to their house and asked for permission to change the oil in my car in their driveway. I didn't know much about cars – and still don't – but I knew how to change the oil. So, I picked up the supplies, drove to their house and changed the oil – no problem. But then I had this bright idea that I would change the oil in their car – my girlfriend's parents' car which also happened to be in the driveway. I figured I could do this and score some points with her parents. She had already told me that her dad had never changed his own oil. So, I got the oil and the oil filter and went to work. I had trouble removing the oil filter so I used a hammer and screw driver and drove the screwdriver through the filter, then used it as a lever and eventually removed it but not before creating a small pool of oil on the driveway. I figured I could clean this up later, so I put on the new filter which didn't seem to go on quite right – and then I put in the new oil and started the car – and when I got out of the car, I noticed oil pouring from the bottom of the car. The connection of the oil filter was leaking oil – and I'd forgotten to put the plug back in the oil pan. And what I was seeing on the driveway wasn't just a mess. It was a mess in the driveway of a set of parents I wanted to impress. I hadn't even asked their

permission. This was going to be my surprise. I put the plug back in the oil pan, but I couldn't get the oil filter to fit. Here I was surrounded by a mess of my own making, and what do you think happened next?

Her dad came out, saw the mess, pointed a finger at me and said, "Boy, what have you done? You better find a way to clean this mess up. You made it. You fix it. I expect you to make it right." And he turned and went back inside and left me there in a pool of oil with the oil filter in my right hand. And some of you think that's what God is like – that God looks at you in the midst of whatever mess you are in and says, that's what you deserve. You figure it out. Call me when you get this mess cleaned up. But I'm hoping someone here today thinks that's not what happened when my girlfriend's dad realized what I had done. Because he had compassion on me – and then there was a choice. Leave me to figure this out, or help me find a solution. We got to work cleaning up the mess – and neither one of us knew how to fix the car, so I called AAA and when the truck arrived, I explained my dilemma and he got under the car and fixed the problem.

Have you ever had a mess so big you didn't know where to start? God looked at the world God had made, and God had a choice: do I get into this mess and find a starting point or just walk away. Four thousand years ago, God interrupted humanity and chose Abraham as his starting point. Abraham was far from a perfect man. There was a time when Abraham was in Egypt with his wife, Sarah, and some of Pharaoh's servants noticed how beautiful Sarah was and told Pharaoh. So Pharaoh wanted Sarah for himself, and when the servants asked Abraham if she was his wife, Abraham fearing for his life said, "No – she's my sister, you can have her." He gave his wife to Pharaoh. Is this a great man of God? You'll have to read the rest of Genesis 12 to find out what happened next. But, don't miss this point: Abraham was flawed, but God had to start somewhere. So, God picks Abraham – and says, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you." (Genesis 12:1) Abraham, I'm asking you to leave your circle of influence, all you have ever know and go to a new place that I will choose for you and start over. And then God makes 3 promises.

Promise 1: I will make you into a great nation. God promises to make Abraham a great nation. Not merely a nation, but a great nation which is an odd promise considering his wife, Sarah cannot have children at all. There were ways of getting around a woman's inability to have children. Even then, there was adoption and surrogacy, and Abraham and Sarah will try that and when they do, God makes it clear: "I will make you a great nation." Do you trust me?

Promise 2: I will make your name great. God promises a legacy. I will make your name great. How many of you have heard of Abraham? How many of you have heard of Chedorlaomer? Chedorlaomer was a famous king of the nation of Elam. Everybody at the time of Abraham knew Chedorlaomer – no one had heard of Abraham. There's a story earlier in Genesis about a tower people were trying to build in Babble so that the people could make a name for themselves – which didn't turn out well for them. God was saying, long after you have left this earth people will remember you. Do you trust me?

Promise 3: all the people on earth will be blessed through you. God not only wants to bless Abraham, God wants to bless all people – that's you and me – because of Abraham. And God tried in the Garden of Eden, but it didn't work. God tried again with Noah and that didn't work out either. So God tries again with Abraham. God wants to bless Abraham so that Abraham will be a blessing. God wants to bless Abraham not because he deserves it, not because he was perfect. What set Abraham apart from others before him was not that he always did the right thing. What Abraham was prepared to do was believe what God said to him.

Fast forward 25 years and Abraham still has no children. He was not a young man when God made the promises, and now Abraham is old. And if he died everything he has goes to Eliezer, his servant. There will be no nation, no legacy, no blessing. And Abraham says to God, "You promised!" And God says (sometimes we think God was speaking to Abraham constantly, but according to Genesis this only happened every 25 years – some of us give up and stop listening if God doesn't speak to us by the end of the day or the end of the week – for Abraham, 25 years!) **This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir.** In other words, Abraham – Will you trust me? Then Genesis tells us God says to Abraham, "look up at the night sky. How many stars do you see? Try to count them. A thousand? Is that enough? Or 100 thousand? Is that enough? A million? Even more than that will one day call you father. Will you trust me?"

And in the next verse we are given the nature of the relationship between God and us. How can someone as small and insignificant as me have a relationship with the Creator of the Universe? How is that possible? How can you know? Genesis tells us, **Abraham believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.** Abraham believed even when there was no evidence that he should believe. He had no son, no heir, no nation, no reputation – all he had were God's promises. In that moment when Abraham trusted, God credited – we know about credit – credit means you can have it now even when you can't afford it, even when you don't deserve it, even when you have no means whatsoever to repay it. Abraham trusted – and God credited it to Abraham as righteousness. God says, Abraham, I accept you, because you believe.

It is almost unimaginable that God, the Creator of the Universe would make the standard, the starting point so simple – and yet so difficult. God, who sees us in the mess of our own making, says the way to enter into a relationship with me is not through who you are related to or having the right behavior – it's simple – TRUST. Even when there is no evidence that God will keep God's promises – that's what makes this so difficult.

If you were here the past two weeks, I talked about how I stepped back into golf this summer after walking away 33 years ago. It had become a frustrating game for me. And for a lot of people it still is. The potential for mistakes is constant even among the very best golfers in the world. This summer, here's what I've learned from golf – after all the training, all the practice sessions, when I stand at the ball with a club in my hand, ready to take a swing – trust. My worth, you see, is not measured in how I hit the ball or even if I hit the ball. My worth has already been determined. The Creator of the University, who knows me by name, says, Will you trust me? God picked one unrighteous man and connected with him in a personal way and all God required was that he say: God, I trust you. To be loved unconditionally – it's not based on what you do or don't do – it's a matter of trust. What do you think? Is it as simple as that? Can you just trust?

GPS for Week of September 24, 2017

Weekly Prayer: God of us all, deepen our faith. Help us to live, trusting that you are with us each step of the way. We know our faith will shake and falter, but continue to strengthen us and to let us see every moment that you are ever faithful. We know we can trust you. Help us to do just that. Amen.

Monday, September 25

Scripture: Hebrews 11:1-3, 6

Faith is the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don't see. The elders in the past were approved because they showed faith.

By faith we understand that the universe has been created by a word from God so that the visible came into existence from the invisible.

It's impossible to please God without faith because the one who draws near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards people who try to find him.

Observation: Hebrews 11:1 said, "Faith is the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don't see." This is challenging, especially if hard experiences have left us wary of trusting anyone or anything. Yet belief isn't limited to the realm of religion. Astronomers and physicists wrestle with ideas like "dark energy" or "dark matter" —unseen, largely unexplained forces that leave clear signs of their existence. Religious belief, too, deals with unseen forces like divine love, grace and dependability, forces that also leave the marks of their existence in our lives.

Application: Oxford scholar Alister McGrath wrote, "Coming to faith doesn't mean merely having a new idea. It means recognizing in our minds who God is and what he is like, and responding to him in our hearts." What experiences or people have helped your faith in God move beyond assent to trust, commitment and obedience?

Prayer: Lord God, you gave me a mind that questions and seeks answers. You gave me a heart that can marvel at things bigger than my analytical powers. Help me exercise both my intelligence and my capacity for marvel when I say, "I believe." Amen.

Tuesday, September 26

Scripture: Acts 17:22-34

Paul stood up in the middle of the council on Mars Hill and said, "People of Athens, I see that you are very religious in every way. As I was walking through town and carefully observing your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: 'To an unknown God.' What you worship as unknown, I now proclaim to you. God, who made the world and everything in it, is Lord of heaven and earth. He doesn't live in temples made with human hands. Nor is God served by human hands, as though he needed something, since he is the one who gives life, breath, and everything else. From one person God created every human nation to live on the whole earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their lands. God made the nations so they would seek him, perhaps even reach out to him and find him. In fact, God isn't far away from any of us. In God we live, move, and exist. As some of your own poets said, 'We are his offspring.' "Therefore, as God's offspring, we have no need to imagine that the divine being is like a gold, silver, or stone image made by human skill and thought. God overlooks ignorance of these things in times past, but now directs everyone everywhere to change their hearts and lives. This is because God has set a day when he intends to judge the world justly by a man he has appointed. God has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead." When they heard about the resurrection from the dead, some began to ridicule Paul. However, others said, "We'll hear from you about this again." At that, Paul left the council. Some people joined him and came to believe, including Dionysius, a member of the council on Mars Hill, a woman named Damaris, and several others.

Observation: Christians don't just believe ideas—we believe in someone. To philosophers in Athens, the apostle Paul laid out the kind of God in which he (and Christians after him) believed. In verse 28, he even quoted a philosopher named Epimenides and the Stoic poet Aratus. Paul made it plain that Christians trust in a personal, life-giving, loving God, not just a vague, abstract force.

Application: Few in today's first-world cultures hold the specific idea Paul challenged in the Athenians: "We have no need to imagine that the divine being is like a gold, silver, or stone image made by human skill and thought." In what ways, however, can we idolize "human skill and thought" in place of God? Do you find inner resonance when Paul said, "God isn't far away from any of us," or do you struggle to believe that is true?

Prayer: Lord God, I believe in and trust you as a personal being who loves me and my world. Help me live and act in ways that show that your love has touched my life. Amen.

Wednesday, September 27

Scripture: Exodus 4:19-22; Romans 8:13-17

The LORD said to Moses in Midian, "Go back to Egypt because everyone there who wanted to kill you has died." So Moses took his wife and his children, put them on a donkey, and went back to the land of Egypt. Moses also carried the shepherd's rod from God in his hand. The LORD said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, make sure that you appear before Pharaoh and do all the amazing acts that I've given you the power to do. But I'll make him stubborn so that he won't let the people go. Then say to Pharaoh, 'This is what the LORD says: Israel is my oldest son.

If you live on the basis of selfishness, you are going to die. But if by the Spirit you put to death the actions of the body, you will live. All who are led by God's Spirit are God's sons and daughters. You didn't receive a spirit of slavery to lead you back again into fear, but you received a Spirit that shows you are adopted as his children. With this Spirit, we cry, "Abba, Father." The same Spirit agrees with our spirit, that we are God's children. But if we are children, we are also heirs. We are God's heirs and fellow heirs with Christ, if we really suffer with him so that we can also be glorified with him.

Observation: The Bible often applied the term "Father" to God, but Exodus 4 said God planted the idea, calling Israel "my son." Calling God "Father" was a metaphor. It said God is the ideal all human fathers try to reach. Paul applied the metaphor not to power and dominance. Paul said the Holy Spirit teaches us to address God with the Aramaic word *abba*. *Abba*, many scholars say, was how little children addressed their fathers, somewhat akin to English words like "daddy" or "papa."

Application: In Romans 8:15, Paul contrasted "a spirit of slavery to lead you back again into fear" with God's loving adoption of us as sons and daughters. Are you more inclined to see God as a person we serve out of fear, or as a loving father who wants what is best for us? What factors shaped your view? If your life experience filled the word "father" with negative memories, what images and relationships help you trust that God is love?

Prayer: Lord God, for me to confess that I believe in you as father, as *abba*, moves me. Bless my earthly father and father figures. Thank you for being, not just higher and greater than any of them, but more loving, too. Amen.

Thursday, September 28

Scripture: Isaiah 40:26-31

Look up at the sky and consider: Who created these? The one who brings out their attendants one by one, summoning each of them by name. Because of God's great strength and mighty power, not one is missing. Why do you say, Jacob, and declare, Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD my God ignores my predicament"? Don't you know? Haven't you heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. He doesn't grow tired or weary. His understanding is beyond human reach, giving power to the tired and reviving the exhausted. Youths will become tired and weary, young men will certainly stumble; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength; they will fly up on wings like eagles; they will run and not be tired; they will walk and not be weary.

Observation: This Isaiah passage spoke to weary Israelites facing a long, hard trip on foot from Babylon to Israel after years of exile. They were tempted to think God didn't see their hardships. The prophet invited his readers (and us) to trust where we don't understand, to "hope in the Lord" for renewed strength, and through faith to "fly up on wings like eagles," to "walk and not be weary."

Application: Isaiah wrote, "His understanding is beyond human reach" (verse 28). Our need to control, our challenge with "letting go," can keep us stuck in the very problems we seek to escape. God calls us to "let go" and trust him because "his understanding is beyond human reach." How can trusting, really trusting, in a God who's vastly wiser than you are renew your strength by setting you free from the need to know all the answers?

Prayer: Lord God, I need you to go through this day with me. I need your strength and encouragement so that I can live with hope and not be weary. Amen.

Friday, September 29

Scripture: Genesis 1:31-2:3; Psalm 19:1-6; Acts 4:23-24

God saw everything he had made: it was supremely good. There was evening and there was morning: the sixth day.

The heavens and the earth and all who live in them were completed. On the sixth day God completed all the work that he had done, and on the seventh day God rested from all the work that he had done. God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all the work of creation.

Heaven is declaring God's glory; the sky is proclaiming his handiwork. One day gushes the news to the next, and one night informs another what needs to be known. Of course, there's no speech, no words— their voices can't be heard— but their sound extends throughout the world; their words reach the ends of the earth. God has made a tent in heaven for the sun. The sun is like a groom coming out of his honeymoon suite; like a warrior, it thrills at running its course. It rises in one end of the sky; its circuit is complete at the other. Nothing escapes its heat.

After their release, Peter and John returned to the brothers and sisters and reported everything the chief priests and elders had said.

They listened, then lifted their voices in unison to God, "Master, you are the one who created the heaven, the earth, the sea, and everything in them.

Observation: Christians believe God's creative power produced life. Instead of the (unprovable) belief that the universe is a cosmic accident, we believe God made all that is. Copernicus, Galileo and the Hubbell telescope have expanded our understanding of how life works. (E.g. we no longer describe the sun's activity in the way Psalm 19:6 does).

Application: "Heaven is declaring God's glory; the sky is proclaiming his handiwork. One day gushes the news to the next, and one night informs another what needs to be known...their sound extends throughout the world; their words reach the ends of the earth." Are you listening? What do you "hear" as you open yourself to the vastness of God?

Prayer: Creator God, I join the early Christians in saying, "You are the one who created the heaven, the earth, the sea and everything in them." And, as part of that, you gave me the precious gift of life. Help me to use it well, to your glory. Amen.

Saturday, September 30

Scripture: Exodus 34:4-9; 2 Corinthians 3:1-3; 1 John 4:16-19

So Moses cut two stone tablets like the first ones. He got up early in the morning and climbed up Mount Sinai, just as the LORD had commanded him. He carried the two stone tablets in his hands. The LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him, and proclaimed the name, "The LORD." The LORD passed in front of him and proclaimed: "The LORD! The LORD! a God who is compassionate and merciful, very patient, full of great loyalty and faithfulness, showing great loyalty to a thousand generations, forgiving every kind of sin and rebellion, yet by no means clearing the guilty, punishing for their parents' sins their children and their grandchildren, as well as the third and the fourth generation." At once Moses bowed to the ground and worshipped. He said, "If you approve of me, my Lord, please go along with us. Although these are stubborn people, forgive our guilt and our sin and take us as your own possession."

Are we starting to commend ourselves again? We don't need letters of introduction to you or from you like other people, do we? You are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. You show that you are Christ's letter, delivered by us. You weren't written with ink but with the Spirit of the living God. You weren't written on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

We have known and have believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who remain in love remain in God and God remains in them. This is how love has been perfected in us, so that we can have confidence on the Judgment Day, because we are exactly the same as God is in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear, because fear expects punishment. The person who is afraid has not been made perfect in love. We love because God first loved us.

Observation: All Christian faith is founded on trust in a real God who loves us. This was (and is) quite extraordinary. Egyptians, Canaanites, Greeks or Romans—none of them believed their gods loved them. But Exodus said God showed Moses a divine character based on the profound realities of love and forgiveness. And that belief makes a real difference. Paul told the Corinthians that their changed lives were some of the best evidence that God is real.

Application: These Biblical ideas are so familiar, repeated so often, that it may be hard for us to catch their depth and power. Have you ever known (or been) a person who tends to see God as out to get you, an angry being to be placated by good behavior? How does that view affect

our ability to love or trust God? St. Augustine said, “God loves us as if there were only one of us.” What do you think he was trying to communicate? Is that also how you understand God’s love?

Prayer: God of love and grace, as the anguished father in the Bible prayed, “I believe—help my unbelief.” Ground my life ever more deeply in the reality of your existence as the ultimate source of life, love and grace. Amen.