

THE POWER OF FAITH

Old Testament Lesson Genesis 12:1-10

The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there. Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him. From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD. Then Abram set out and continued toward the Negev. Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe.

Galatians 3:6-9

So also Abraham "believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham. Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

John 20:19-23

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

MESSAGE:

Many years ago when I had left academia and was starting out in the business world, I was blessed to work for a man who was a superb supervisor. He was the vice-president of manufacturing but he taught me everything I needed to know about employee relations. We had a great relationship and I loved going to work every morning. Then one Friday

afternoon the phone in my office rang and it was him. He said in a serious voice, "Would you please come to my office."

Now he had frequently complimented me on the job I was doing as personnel manager but something about the tone of his voice put me on high alert and I began to wonder if I was in trouble for something I might have done. I had spent a considerable amount of time in my life getting in and out of trouble, so I had cause to worry. I went over the past week or so in my mind to see if I had offended anyone. I drew a blank, but that didn't help.

My walk down the hallway to his office probably took about half a minute, but by the time I knocked on his door, I had worked myself into such a state that I half expected to be fired. The way he said, "Come in" didn't help things. I entered his office and indicated with a toss of his head that I was supposed to sit down in a chair in front of his desk.

He put down some papers he had been reading, looked up and stared at me for a few seconds without saying anything. Then he laughed,, tossed me a set of keys and said, "Powell, I'm getting a new company car and we'd like for you to have the one I'm turning in." Instead of being given my walking papers, I was being given a two-year-old Lincoln! In one second my fears evaporated and I was sitting on top of the world!

Thinking back on it I imagine it's how the disciples probably felt when Jesus first appeared to them after he had risen from the dead! In despair over the defeat and murder of their leader, they were huddling behind locked doors, expecting any moment to hear Roman soldiers pounding on the doors. And then, suddenly, Jesus appeared among them! And with four words, "*Peace be unto you!*"—he wiped away their guilt and fear and turned their despair into joy! "*They rejoiced to see the Lord!*" says the text, and we can easily believe it. They were vindicated and they were saved! They had thought they were pathetic losers and they were victors after all.

I'm afraid, though, that most of the time, we're the opposite: victors who spend our lives acting like pathetic losers. Once the Apostles knew that their Savior was alive and well, they went out and fearlessly proclaimed his resurrection to the ends of the earth. But we prefer to keep our faith to ourselves and let other people make fools out of themselves over Jesus. We'd rather keep things nice and peaceful and even when we're given the opportunity to stand up for Jesus, we don't have much to say. We're afraid that if we identify ourselves as His followers the world will think we're fools or fanatics so we retreat behind walls of silence and wait for the day of rejoicing, when He will return to be among us and tell us that everything is OK, that he forgives us and welcomes us back as his disciples. Then we'll rejoice—when it's safe to do so. But God has given us something that enables us to rejoice right now!

He has given us the power of faith. We tend to think of faith as a purely religious thing, but faith goes far beyond religion. God has fashioned us in such a way that faith plays a central role in our lives, whether we know it or not.

For example, the thing that determines the success or failure of any financial organization is faith. One sure way for a bank or insurance company or investment firm to fail is for its investors to lose faith in its solvency—forcing a panic and a run on its assets. A

company's stock plunges when stockholders lose faith in its future and are willing to sell at any price. The same is true of national economies.

In 1932, an economic depression was sweeping across America. And then a newly elected president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, spoke eight famous words in his first inaugural address: *"We have nothing to fear but fear itself."* Roosevelt knew that what America needed more than anything else was a resurgence of faith in our system. Faith could conquer fear and doubt—and it did. The same is true of our form of government.

The grandfather of our constitution, the Baron Charles de Montesquieu, wrote that all forms of government derive their power from the consent of the governed but that different forms of government obtain that consent in different ways. A monarchy, for example, rests on the people's loyalty to their king. A dictatorship rests on the people's fear of the dictator. But a republic rests upon what Montesquieu called "the public virtue." And the public virtue had two parts: people's faith in each other and people's faith in the government itself.

When self-interest replaces public virtue, disaster lies ahead. *"When the citizens of the republic begin voting themselves largesse from the public treasury, it is the beginning of the end of the republic. When the people's faith in each other fails—rules, regulations, laws and red tape rush in to fill the void—and these are instruments of bondage, not freedom."* Does this sound familiar?

Our country is facing exactly this kind of crisis today—a crisis of faith in our national character and mission; a crisis of faith in our public officials; a crisis of faith in the integrity of our electoral system—even a crisis of faith in the American dream itself. We all have our favorite political explanations about what's bringing this crisis about—and who is causing it—but the bottom line is that our faith in each other and in the government is diminished from what it was fifty years ago. And where faith is diminished, blessing is diminished, because God has designed us to run optimally on faith—not fear.

And just as God has designed economic and social systems to run on faith, he has designed the most fundamental unit of society—marriage—to run on faith as well. It takes faith to make a marriage survive and prosper because two sinners living under one roof is a recipe for strife.

God forgives and forgets our sins but we have difficulty forgiving and forgetting each other's sins. And if we base our hopes for our marriages on each other's performance we will be in trouble. What is called for is faith in God's plan that marriage should be for life—that what God has joined together, man should not rend asunder. Faith that if we ask him to, God will enable us to look at each other through the eyes of Christ, rather than through our own eyes.

There are many ways in which faith is the key to how we live our lives here on earth. We have two choices: faith or unbelief. Unbelief is the way the skeptic seeks to protect himself against being disappointed. He ends up consigning himself to cynicism and despair. Unbelief can always find a way to justify itself because a sinful world provides massive evidence of sin and its wreckage. But faith believes in the providence of God's will and God's word.

Faith insists on seeing the disease cured, the wound bound up, the sin washed away. It doesn't derive its power to do this from anything in this world; that would be attempting to heal the infection by adding more bacteria to the wound. Faith derives its power from one place and one place alone: the Holy Spirit of God who looks for a home in every human heart—***where He can create and nourish faith.***

The irony is that faith itself is a passive thing, merely a channel that conducts God's power into our hearts and minds. Faith is the outstretched hand of a beggar receiving a gift from a king. Faith is a tiny window the Holy Spirit opens up in our minds to let the light of God's love and truth shine into our dark natures.

This is why faith has no appetite for things of this world: it feeds on heavenly manna, the Word and Sacraments of God. Through His Word and Sacraments, God enlarges the tiny window of faith and allows His light and truth to pour into our minds.

Spirit-created faith opens up our heart and mind to receive knowledge of the Kingdom of God as we navigate our way through this vale of tears. We can't create faith; we can't increase faith; all we can do is thank God for giving us faith and never mix it up with things of this world. When we do that—when we exchange our faith in God's love for faith in what this world has to offer—we exchange gold for lead and the truth of God for a lie.

Through our faith, God performs miracles in our lives every day. Faith opens up the Scriptures to us just like Jesus opened them up for the two travelers on the road to Emmaus. Faith enables us to receive God's wisdom and power through water and the word. Faith enables us to know with certainty that when we go to the Lord's Table we are receiving Jesus' body and blood into our own body and blood where He can continue the work of recreating us in His image—the image that we lost when sin entered the world.

Let's be honest: we're sorry examples of faith—just like Peter and John and James and all the rest were. We hide behind doors and tremble, and like Thomas, demand for God to show us evidence that He is really there before we're willing to place our trust in Him. And even then, truth be known, we have doubts.

We don't do a very good job with the faith God has given us. But thanks be to God, he *has* given us faith. And so as we walk down the hallway to the boss's office, let's begin our rejoicing even now in solid faith that victory lies ahead.

Amen.