



One of the greatest challenges in my faith life is a little three letter word: “But”. B-U-T. Let me explain.

Back in July you may recall that our nation and our world had experienced a number of tragedies in a very short period of time. Nationally we were experiencing riots and shootings as a result of racial tensions. At that time the most recent event was the killing of three police officers in Baton Rouge. Internationally the world was reeling from the mass killing in Nice, France, Istanbul and Ankara. I think all of us were feeling as if we were carrying a massive load on our shoulders. Right here at Prince of Peace we had experienced an extraordinary number of deaths. Our faith community was filled with grieving families.

And I remember gathering for worship on the weekend of July 16 & 17. As I sat down a few minutes before the start of the worship service I had a little conversation with God. It went something like this, “God, in a moment I’m going to stand up before this congregation with a smile on my face and tell them that we’ve gathered today to worship you, our faithful God. But (there’s that word) the world seems to be falling apart. How can I do that with any integrity? How can we praise you as ‘good’ in the midst of such senseless pain? How can I proclaim your faithfulness when it feels as if you’ve left the world to spin out of control? I want to thank and praise you, but (there it is again) I’m finding it hard to do.”

Have you ever had a conversation with God like that? Have the circumstances of life ever gotten so dark, so out of control, that they’ve left you wondering if you can trust God? Maybe even left you wondering if God is real? If so, we’re not alone. Today, as we continue our journey through the biblical story, we’re going to meet a man who’s been there and done that. His name is Abraham. Before we read our scripture text today let me set the story up.

Turn to Genesis 12 in your bible. This is a turning point in the story. God reveals his plan to bless the world. Read verses 1-3 with me:

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

That’s quite a promise, isn’t it? God promises to give Abraham land to call his own. And he promises to make of his descendants a great nation. God promises to bless Abraham, and through Abraham God would bless the world. Pretty sweet promise, isn’t it? Can you imagine just getting out of high school or college, just starting to think about your life, and God shows up and makes those outrageous promises to you? That would be incredible! It would be like winning the lottery. You’d be set for life, right?

Except, that’s not how it happened for Abraham. Year after year went by and Abraham and his wife, Sarah, had no children. In fact, if you read the story you’ll discover that Abraham and Sarah’s life was hard, so hard that Abraham doubted God’s promise and God’s goodness. And that’s what we’re going to hear in today’s scripture reading. Turn to Genesis 15:1-6 and let’s read the passage together. [NLT]

Could you hear the unspoken “but” in Abraham conversation with God? It’s as if he was saying, “Hey God, it’s real nice of you to tell me not to be afraid and all BUT as you might have noticed we’re not getting any younger here, and we still don’t have a child. Exactly how are you going to make a great nation from me?” Can you hear the distress and doubt in Abraham’s words? Can you hear his faith waver? And it’s hard to blame him for that. We’ve probably all been there. I know that I have. I think about the day I heard the doctors at the Mayo Clinic tell Nancy and I that our son’s pancreatic tumors had grown and that he would require surgery. If, in that moment, you had asked me, “How’s that faith in God working for you?” I’d have been hard pressed to give you a very positive answer.

I want you to know today that it’s OK to doubt. No matter how much our faith waivers God’s love for us never waivers. But if you’re like me you don’t want your faith to waiver, even in in tough times. So, here’s the “big truth” that I think we can take away from Abraham’s story: God’s faithfulness isn’t proven or disproven by our circumstances. Let me say that again: God’s faithfulness isn’t proven or disproven by our circumstances. Did you catch what God did in response to Abraham’s doubts? God took Abraham outside and told him to look up into the clear night sky and count the stars. And then God reiterated his promise, that Abraham’s descendants would be as numerous as those stars.

Dark and difficult circumstances can make us feel like we’re inside, unable to see beyond the walls of our own challenges. But then God comes along and invites us to look up. In fact, in the margin of your bible, next to verse 5 write those words, “Look up.” When challenges come our way God calls us to look, to look beyond our circumstances and remember God’s promises. That’s what the stars represent in Abraham’s story. They represent God’s promise. God

was telling Abraham this is faith isn't in his circumstances; his faith is in God's promise. And that's true for us too. Our faith is not in our circumstances. Our faith is not in what our eyes can see. Our faith is in God's promises. If we judged God's goodness and faithfulness by our circumstances our faith would rise and fall like the price of gas. But our faith is in God's promises.

Let me encourage you to write "Hebrews 11:1" in the margin of your bible too, and to reflect on that verse this week. It says, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Our faith is not in what our eyes can see. Our faith is rooted in the hope that God is faithful to God's promises to us. And the anchor of that hope is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. If you want to know how faithful God is to God's promises, look up to the cross, not to your circumstances.

Remember last week I told you that we're going to repeatedly return to the theme of what it means to be a hero? So often in our culture heroes are the ones who have it all together, and when they do face difficult circumstances they prevail because their own great power and strength. But the bible holds Abraham up as one the great heroes of the faith. His life was not all together. He did not prevail over his challenges by his own great power and strength. In the end, Abraham was a hero because he had faith in what his eyes could not see. Abraham trusted God's promise.

On that weekend back in July, just before I stood up to welcome the congregation to worship, I looked up at the beauty of the morning sky. While my mind was filled with lots of "buts" my heart embraced an "and". The world is broken, and many people are struggling with grief and fear AND God is with us. God has promised that nothing, neither death nor life nor anything else in all of creation will be able to separate us from his love. And God has promised to be at work in ways we cannot see or fathom to bring healing and restoration to the brokenness of our world and of our lives. That is God's promise.

This week, when difficult circumstances arise and your mind fills with "buts" I want you look up. That's what heroes of the faith do. Did you notice that God had to lead Abraham out of his tent in order to look up at the sky and count the stars? Life is like that. When times are tough it's like being in a tent. Our horizon shrinks. So, let God lead you out to see a larger horizon. Look up. Turn your heart toward the promise of God's loving presence, trusting God despite what your eyes can see. And do not be afraid.