

Moving Forward in Faith ~ March 8, 2009

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16, Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38; Psalm 22:23-31

Life for many of us right now is very challenging at best and difficult at worst. This is not just in our little corner of the world but everywhere.

The other night on the network news, the anchor was reading emails that had been received from all around the country. These emails said, in effect, “We know things are bad, you do not have to keep telling us this and making things seem worse. Can’t you look at some of the good that is going on during these difficult times?” The answer to these emails was “Yes, we could.” So, beginning next week, NBC Nightly News will begin to feature some of the good things happening in the midst of our confusion and fear.

On a personal note, I heard from a friend the other day who told me he had lost 43% of his total worth. This is happening all over and to people who have varying amounts of worth. In the case of my friend, a successful businessman in the Midwest, millions of dollars have been lost. The thing that was troubling him, more than his personal loss, was what might become of the employees who had worked for him and his father for many years. Their 401K plans had shrunken along with the hopes many of the older people had of retiring. He is still holding his business together while grinding his teeth and praying that there will be some glimmer of hope one of these days.

I am grateful I grew up with parents who survived the Great Depression and that I learned from them, and later on my own, how to buckle down and become a minimalist in many ways. I always used to tell them that I knew I was born so that they could get extra sugar and a set of tires, I had seen the old ration books. While I hope we will not find ourselves back in those less than “good old days,” the times have changed and I do not know what people will do who cannot change and adapt with them.

The human ability to adapt in times of change has existed since the first humans strolled the earth. Those who could not adapt did not survive.

In this morning’s story from the Hebrew Bible, we saw Abram become Abraham and Sarai become Sarah. We always know when there is a name change in Bible stories that something dramatic is going on. Our best example from the New Testament is that of Saul becoming Paul.

A name change signifies a new way of life for people. Abraham and Sarah were going to become the parents of many nations. If we had read a little farther in this story, we would have learned that both of them laughed at the thought of this, because they were long past the age of having children. But, along came Isaac, whose name means “laughter” or “he laughs”, and from him came Jacob and the twelve tribes of Israel. The book of Genesis is full of wonderful stories of people learning to adapt and move on in faith knowing that God was with them and would support them in times of trouble.

Not only in Genesis are stories of faith, but throughout the pages of scripture. These stories of faith are based on the covenants, the promises between God and humans that carried people forward in faith and in hope.

Even the words of Jesus from the gospel of Mark, as full of doom as they may be, encouraged those who heard them to keep on moving forward -- there was still hope.

More than ever we need to remember that there is hope for us and our lives and the lives of our children and grandchildren. There are days when we sense we can move forward with giant steps and then there are those other days when we hope to manage a few inches. If we live in faith and hope there will be few steps that go backward.

If we faced life with little or no faith we would find that we would grind to a halt. We would never try anything new and would lose a great deal of the joy of life. If we did not have faith that every new day brings another chance to figure things out we would become locked in our own old patterns and designs. We would become stuck and stymied, not aware that better things may be just around the next corner.

We are called to reach out and extend our faith through the way we live our lives and the way we treat others. When we have courage and face whatever it is life deals us with calmness and the assurance that God is on our side, we can make great strides in going about the work we have been given. When we understand that each of us is a precious child of God, we find the faith that grounds us in an uncertain world and that sustains us as we seek to make that world a better place in which to dwell.

We make the world a better place one step at a time; one kind action at a time. We look for the presence of God in others and understand that we all have been created in God's image and that others are seeking the strength and courage and faith to step out and make their own pathways through life. We understand and offer our support. We come to realize that we are all in this together—whether we have millions or whether we survive from paycheck to paycheck or with no check at all.

We are much like our ancestors who braved eras of challenge and change and became more inventive and creative as they moved along. Most of them believed their lives were supported by a God who loved them and considered them precious. This knowledge allowed them to dare to do new things and lay a foundation for our lives that would not be easily shaken. We continue this journey in our world today, centered in faith with a sense that God will not let us go but will continue to guide us through all the difficulties life may hand us.

As we journey through this Lenten season, we need to take the time to reflect on all it is that strengthens and upholds us. Then we need to be grateful that we are the thoughtful, creative beings we are, able to withstand much as we move forward amid the encircling gloom to brighter days.

-- Amen