

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church, January 31, 2021

Hymns: 425 – We praise You, O God; 646 – Lead me Jesus; 645 – Follow me, the Master said; 651 – Guide Me, O Thou Great Redeemer

Scripture: Genesis 12:1-5; Mark 3:31-35; Galatians 3:6-9; :26-29

Sermon Title: Feet of Faith

Genesis 12:1-5 (NIV)

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 people 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.

Galatians 3:6-9, :26-29 (Contemporary English Version)

The Scriptures say that God accepted Abraham because Abraham had faith. And so, you should understand that everyone who has faith is a child of Abraham. Long ago the Scriptures said that God would accept the Gentiles because of their faith. That’s why God told Abraham the good news that all nations would be blessed because of him. This means that everyone who has faith will share in the blessings that were given to Abraham because of his faith.

...All of you are God’s children because of your faith in Christ Jesus. And when you were baptized, it was as though you had put on Christ in the same way you put on new clothes. Faith in Christ Jesus is what makes each of you equal with each other, whether you are a Jew or a Greek, a slave or a free person, a man or a woman. So if you belong to Christ, you are now part of Abraham’s family, and you will be given what God has promised.

Mark 3:31-35

Jesus’ mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, “Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.”

“Who are my mother and my brothers?” he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.”

Peter Rollwage has died. Now, you didn’t know him – I didn’t either, except by correspondence – but he is important to me and to my family – in fact to all Rollwages –

because he was a genealogist, and for decades worked hard on drawing up a Rollwage history and family tree, all the way back to the 1500s. Now, Rollwage isn't a particularly common name, even in Germany, so it was a kind of limited task, but I'm grateful for Peter's work, which connects me to my past, and I'm sorry that he succumbed to the ravages of age. The Rollwage line is dwindling, but thanks to Peter, we have roots.

Peter's passing makes the news I am about to share with you all the more meaningful. And here it comes: You and I are related. We're family. We're sons and daughters together, brothers and sisters. We all have a common ancestor. And while you won't find your name in the Rollwage family tree, we are all, you and I, children of a man named Abraham.

His name wasn't always Abraham. He started out as plain old Abram, son of Terah, son of Nahor, son of Serug, son of Reu, son of Peleg, son of Eber, son of Shelah, son of Arphaxad, son of Shem. And Shem's father was an old man who built boats and collected animals in his spare time, seven by seven, and two by two.

You might wonder how I've managed to trace these congregational roots so far back. In fact, I had considerable help from a fellow named Paul, who used to be called Saul. Now Saul, or Paul, wasn't much of a genealogist, either, but he invented a new way of writing a family history. He did not claim that we are related by birth. Rather, he used a different method. If you take a close look at the family tree which Paul has drawn, you will notice a lot of little branches which were grafted onto the tree. And Paul tells us that the glue used to stick them on is an unusual substance called Faith.

Now I'm even less of a gardener than I am a genealogist, but Paul explains his theory clearly. He tells us that the seed that planted Abraham's tree was faith. Faith ran through his very veins, faith was the lifeblood of his family tree. And Paul shows us that when we have faith, our lives are so much like Abraham's, that we fit right in like family. Our branches fit right into the family tree like pieces of a puzzle.

This might be surprising news to us, but Abraham knew it all along. God had told him that many would be blessed through him, and here we are, heirs of the blessing promised to Abraham, living life in the fullness and knowledge of God, countless as the stars in the sky - when you consider how many of us there are, all around the world, and how many there have been, and how many are to come. All of us related, all of us family, all of us resembling one another, recognizable through the faith we commonly share.

Faith isn't an inherited characteristic like the colour of our eyes or the shape of our ears. But faith is recognizable as the thing which keeps us together. When people are

identifying us as part of the same family, faith can show up as clearly as the nose on our face. And where do we look for faith? Well, let's look at Abram.

Don't look at his face, wise and worn by the sand and the sun. Don't look at his beard, long and white with age. Don't look at his hands, clutching his staff with a strength undiminished by the years, or his straight back or his simple clothes or his piercing eyes. Look, instead, at his feet. His feet. That's where you find faith, in the feet. And before you start examining your own feet for tell-tale signs, let me explain. To explain, let's go back to a story of Abram, the first one we read this morning.

We are told that Abram's father Terah, son of Nahor (and so on) started out in a place called Ur of the Chaldeans, in what we now call Iraq. When Terah's father Nahor (son of Serug) died, Terah packed up the household, including the young Abram and his new bride Sarai, and they headed up along the Euphrates river right to where it begins to dwindle, to a place called Herra, in what is now Turkey, just north of the Syrian border. The Bible tells us that, doubtless thanks to yogurt, goat's milk and clean living, Abraham's father Terah died at the remarkable age of 205. And shortly after that, something even more remarkable happened:

*The Lord 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."*

We aren't told if Abram said anything back. We aren't told if he was scared, or confused, or happy beyond words. We aren't told if God spoke to him in a dream or through a prophet or from the clouds in a great booming voice, just like in the movies. We do know, though, how he responded. And how do we know? Watch his feet. Even if his eyes are looking back on his father's country and even if his heart is looking back to his father's people and even if his wallet is crying out to his father's wealth, take a look at his feet. And what do they do? Listen to this: *"So Abram left, as the Lord had told him...and set out for the land of Canaan, and arrived there."*

It's not easy at the tender age of 75 to pack everything up and go to a strange and uncertain land. It's not easy to leave the security of home behind and head out in your advancing age on a promise and a prayer. But he went. He believed God. We know, because we watched his feet, and they went like a compass in whatever direction God pointed.

Abram's whole life was like that. No matter how unlikely or how difficult; when God spoke, Abram's feet did their thing. When he found enemies in the land, forward he went. When he and his nephew Lot parted ways, onward he went alone into Canaan, while Lot went for the night-life and bright lights of two towns called Sodom and Gomorrah, which says a lot for Lot's feet.

When the Lord told Abram to walk the length and breadth of the land promised to him, off he went, his feet stirring the dust of Canaan. When God promised the childless Abram a son by his wife Sarai, he fell facedown on the ground and laughed - him at the age of ninety-nine, and Sarai a woman of ninety. Sarai laughed so loud that God could hear her, even though she was hiding inside the tent. But watch Abram's feet: in the tent he goes, and nine months later, to the incredulous cheers of the household, Sarah brings forth a son in her ninety-first year.

And watch Abram's feet, dragging now as he walks up the mountain with his young boy, as God puts him to the test, a test to see if he would give even his son for him, even as God would give his own Son for us. And watch his feet as he dances back down the mountain, his son and his future safe at his side.

That's the place to watch Abraham. That's where we find the faith. If we were to write an obituary for this man of faith, we could say no more or no better than the Bible, when it says, "He walked before God."

Now back to Paul, who knows something about such things. He says we are related by faith. Paul says that we are not only the descendants of Abraham, but that we are the sons and daughters of God, through faith in Christ Jesus. He tells us that we have been "clothed with Christ;" that when God looks at us he sees his Son. He tells us that we are all related, that there is no distinction between us, that nationality or status or gender or race mean nothing, because we are equal as the children of God. He tells us that as we belong to Christ, we are Abraham's heirs, heirs to the wonderful promises which God made to him.

How do we know we belong to this wonderful family? How do we live up to this great calling? Well, Jesus, redefining family, put it this way: "*Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.*" And how do we know if we are doing the will of God? Take a look at your feet. Ignore for a moment your words or your thoughts, and take a look at your feet. They brought you here this morning. So far, so good. Where else do they bring you? Do they bring you to the door of the needy? Do they bring you to the bedside of the sick? To they take you to befriend the lonely, to assist the poor, to cheer the hopeless? Have they brought you to where God wants you to be? Pious words and pious

thoughts aside, when it comes to faith, it is the feet which are the dead giveaway. The feet, it seems, are the compass of the faith within your heart. Wherever the heart points, the feet are sure to follow. Thoughts and prayers are good – but the feet are the telltale signs of faith in action.

I'll say this about Abraham, and I'll say this about Abraham's feet. I'll bet they were sore. And I'll bet they were tired. But you must also say this about Abraham: He never said, "I can't do it." He never said, "I can't do it because it is too far," or, "I can't do it because I have a wife," or, "I have responsibilities," or, "I'm too old." Abraham never said, "Not me. Not these feet. Someone else. Not me." God said to Abraham, "I have a job for you, a purpose," and Abraham did it.

Maybe you think God can't use you, because you're too old. Well, most of you aren't as old as Abraham! Or Sarah! Or Moses, who was 80 when God called him. Some of the most dedicated folks we have in this place look back fondly to when they were 80. Or maybe you think God can't use you, because you are not a beautiful speaker. Again, think about Moses. When God called him at 80, Moses said to God, (Exodus 4:10-12):

*"Please, Lord, I have never been a skilled speaker. Even now, after talking to you, I cannot speak well. I speak slowly and can't find the best words."*

*Then the LORD said to him, "Who made a person's mouth? And who makes someone deaf or not able to speak? Or who gives a person sight or blindness? It is I, the LORD. Now go! I will help you speak, and I will teach you what to say."*

Maybe you think God can't use you, because you can't say fancy prayers. Good! God doesn't want fancy prayers. God wants simple prayers from the heart. Jesus taught, "When you pray, keep it simple, don't give up, and believe that God will answer." He said in Matthew's gospel (Matthew 6:7-8): *And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*

Maybe you think God can't use you, because you haven't got the right education. Think of the Apostle Peter! He knew two things: He knew how to fish, and he knew Jesus. And that was more than enough. Besides, feet don't need much of an education. Feet just need to be pointed in the right way. There are a lot of educated feet that spend far too much time thinking about where to go and precious little time actually going.

Maybe you think God can't use you, because of your sinful past. Remember, Jesus called Matthew to follow him, and he was a tax collector and crook! Many others with sinful pasts followed Jesus, and served him well. Maybe you have not always been

faithful. Remember that Jesus used Peter in mighty ways – the same Peter who denied even knowing Jesus. But Jesus kept on loving him, and built the church upon Peter’s faith. And upon Peter’s feet. They didn’t always go in the right direction. But they got there in the end.

Finally, maybe you think God can’t use you, because you are afraid. You’re not alone! Many people are afraid. But God will give them strength. Remember the promise which God made to Joshua, which we heard a few weeks ago: *“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.”*

So when you ask yourself, “Do I really believe?” take a look at your feet. When you ask yourself, “Am I living for God?” take a look at your feet. When you wonder if you are doing the right thing, take a moment to see if you are doing anything at all, if you are going where God might want you to go.

And when it seems hard or uncertain or difficult or nearly impossible to live up to your calling, remember to look down; and if you look carefully, you might see a dim path, a path walked by Abraham, Sarah, by Moses, Miriam, by Lazarus, by Martha, by Joseph, by Mary, by countless others less famous, others who, over the years, when times were sunny and when times were dark, when faith was strong and when doubt kept nagging, still kept walking that path; others like you and like me. Look ahead and see where others have gone. Follow their footsteps, and the path will become clearer and more defined. Put one foot before the other, and before you know it, you are well on your way to the promise which God has for you.

This is 2021, and I’m calling it the Year of Living Faithfully. It is time for us to rub some life into our sleepy feet, to stand up and exercise some of the faith which God has given us, to follow in the footsteps of our ancestor Abraham, as his feet led him to the promised land; to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, as his feet led him to the hurt, the needy, the lonely, the poor, the cross.

God can use me! God can use you! We are servants together! We are a family of faith! We are the brothers and sisters of Jesus! Let’s put our feet on the path of God, and walk in the light of the Lord.

Thanks be to God, who has given us the path of faith, and a family with whom we share our walk together. Amen.