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## *Abram: Our Father in Faith, and Doubt*

**A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa**  
**Lent 2 – Year C**

If you've been a Christian for any amount of time, you've probably had serious questions, even doubts, about your faith and God, especially when things didn't pan out or God didn't show up in the way you expected. I know I have, which has led me to worry at times that maybe I didn't have any faith at all, because my faith didn't look like I thought it was supposed to: unwavering convictions and certainty and confidence.

But over time, I've come to see faith differently—thanks to the grace of God and my ongoing journey in faith, and thanks to the examples and stories of others, both people I've known personally and people whom I know only through history or scripture. Like Abraham.

Abraham, or Abram, has been called our father in faith, and a great model of faith; and the apostle Paul and reformer Luther have cited our Genesis reading today as the case in point. So if we want to talk about what faith really is, Abraham's story seems like a good place to start.

His story begins well before today's reading, so let's rewind a bit to Genesis 12. Abram and his family have settled in Haran, when the Lord appears, and tells Abram to leave his home for an unknown land, and promises to make him a great nation and to bless him and others through him. Of course, this implies another promise: for all of this to happen, Abram and his wife Sarai, who are old and barren, will have to have a child.

And get this: Abram does just as the Lord says—no if's, and's, or but's! He heads off to God-knows-where, taking Sarai and his nephew Lot and the rest of his household with him. What a great faith story!

But things don't turn out as he expected. When they get to the promised land, it's already *inhabited*, which is rather awkward; so they keep moving and set up camp in the Negeb desert south of it. Then, a famine drives them farther away, into Egypt, where they run into another snafu: Sarah ends up in pharaoh's harem, because Abram got scared and lied and said she was his sister. Fortunately, this is an upstanding pharaoh, as far as pharaohs go, and when he finds out that Sarah is married, he sends them away in peace.

When they get back to the Negeb, their home away from their promised home, it is clear that Lot and Abram have outgrown the land they've shared. So they separate, with Lot taking his choice of the land. But Abram has barely cleaned out Lot's things when Lot is captured by enemy kings, and Abram is dragged into war to rescue him.

All the while, Abram and Sarai are getting older and older, and they still haven't had a child. And all the while, Abram has been trying to trust and follow God, even as this promised destination seems to be a moving target. But his patience is wearing thin.

So, when God speaks to Abram again, in our reading today, this time Abram talks back: "What are you going to give me? You still haven't even given us a child!" Though this may not seem like a "nice" way to talk to God, it's real, and it's probably the most faithful thing Abram can do right now: he's trusting God with his fear and frustration and his most honest questions.

God doesn't get mad or cut him off. Rather, God invites him to step outside, which may be as far as Abram is able or willing to go at this point, and look at the stars in the sky—a sign of all God has done already and all God is still going to do.

And “Abram believed the Lord, and he reckoned it to him as righteousness.” Now think for a second: who is reckoning righteousness to whom here? The NRSV translation answers, “And the Lord reckoned it to him (i.e. Abram) as righteousness.” But that's not what the Hebrew says. No, it just says “he” and “him,” leaving us to wonder: Is God recognizing Abram's righteousness and faith, or is Abram recognizing God's?

However you read it, Abram's belief is a work in progress. Because when God goes on about this promise, Abram asks another question, a question we've all asked at some point: “O Lord God, how am I to know?” Abram needs another sign—he wants solid proof, certainty—before he puts himself out there yet again.

So God tells him to prepare a sacrifice—a covenant ritual. In ancient times, two parties would make a covenant by sacrificing animals, cutting them in two, and walking between the halves—as if to say that if you violate the covenant, you will suffer a fate similar to the animals'.

But do you notice anything strange about this covenant ceremony? (Other than the fact that sounds quite gruesome!) Only one party—that is, only God—passes through. God binds Godself to Abram—and Abram sleeps! God is taking the great leap of faith here!

This is really radical. In this moment, Abram may not have the strength or faith to commit himself or to take any more risks. But God does. And God uses Abram's belief, *and* his doubt to reveal something new to him: to show him that God will risk everything, too—that God will be vulnerable, too, in faith and love.

This *is* a story about Abram's faith—the faith with which he said yes to God, and set off on this journey to God-knows-where, and cried and complained to God through all its twists and turns, and grew in trust along the way.

But it's also a story about God's faithfulness, which is the ground of Abram's faith, and the ground of ours. It's about God's willingness to be bound to us in love, even as we're still learning how to love. It's about God's willingness to be faithful to us, even as we are still learning what faith is and how to be faithful to God.