

## **Risky Business**

*Genesis 12: 1-9*

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There are some great examples of faith around us.

Once a young boy saw the story of the starving people in an African country where they were experiencing a several-year drought. Being moved by their hunger, he decided to raise money by selling pictures for fifty cents apiece. He knocked on the door of an elderly gentleman. The polite old soul came to the door and the young boy asked him to buy some pictures because he was raising money for starving children. The man asked him, "How much are trying to raise?"

"One million dollars," he said with confidence.

"Well I hope you are not doing this alone," the man responded.

"Heck no," the boy said. "My sister is helping me!"

Now that is faith!

James Whistler is remembered as one of America's great painters. When he was first married he and his wife were quite poor. The only furniture they could afford was a bed. So, throughout their modest little house, Whistler and his wife took chalk and sketched drawings on the floor of the furniture they someday hoped to have in their home.

That's faith!

So where are you on faith? Are you in a place where you clamor for more faith or a deeper faith? Or are you in a place where, maybe you once had a faith that was vibrant or solid, but some things have happened that didn't turn out well and you questioned where God was? Maybe or simply you got too busy with life to really pay attention to God and now that faith is somewhere on a back burner? Or is faith for you a matter of accepting certain beliefs or doctrines but those beliefs don't seem to give you much power or energy to live each day?

Where are you on faith? How's your faith?

This sermon is for those who clamor for a deeper, more vibrant faith. And I start with one of the great symbols of faith, the Jewish patriarch, Abraham.

In today's scripture, God encounters Abraham and tells him to leave his country, leave his friends, leave his people and to move off into an unknown country. Americans move an average of seven times over our life time so most of us know how difficult it can be to pull up roots, leave our home, friends and work and move.

But Abraham, then called Abram, relied on his faith, moved out, moved ahead and followed God's instructions. It was an act of faith. Renowned Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, says this is the beginning of Abraham's risky life of faith: that God's call was a call for a "dangerous departure from the presumed world of norms and security."

So, if we are asking questions of faith and looking for a model of what it is or can be or how to obtain it, Abraham is one we look to.

I call Abraham's faith risky business because risk is part of his faith.

You know one of the reasons I think we get stuck in mud of a lackluster, energy-less faith is because we think faith is a noun; that it is a set of principles that we believe about God, or a set of theological propositions that we sign off on.

But the faith of Abraham, and the faith of those who often show us a vibrant faith, see faith as a verb, not a noun. Such a faith is Peter stepping out onto the water. My grammar teachers would call it: "It's an action verb."

Which is to say faith is more than believing... it is a movement of spirit, a progressive action, a reaching out, a trusting in God where our faith intersects life in a dynamic way and gives us energy and direction.

I once went to see a man who had been diagnosed with a serious life-threatening disease. He was a church member, or at least on the membership rolls, but truth be I had never seen him in church. When he told me about his illness he said, "I accepted Jesus Christ as my savior when I was a boy." In other words, he was letting me know he was not worried about the state of his soul should his illness overtake him. But from what I could see, he had little interest in God, or church, or in faith. Rather, I had the unmistakable sense that he was living life in the shallow end of the spiritual pool. His faith was a noun.

No, faith is a verb and one of its primary ingredients is risk.

David Viscott is a psychiatrist and the author of a book entitled *Risking*. He writes: “Taking a risk is central to everything worthwhile in life. Everything you really want in life involves taking a risk. To risk is to loosen your grip on the known and the certain and to reach for something you are not entirely sure of...”

Yes! That is certainly true in relationships, isn't it? Risk is part of relationships.

I remember asking out a girl in high school. I was so nervous. I had gone over how I would do it for days. I stumbled through the awkward invitation. And now after forty-two years of marriage, I'd say the risk of being turned down was well worth it!

Relationships *always* involve risk! I mean, have you ever asked someone to forgive you? Or have you dared to reach out to someone who has hurt you or you them or tried to reconcile a relationship that has gone off the rails? That is risky business.

Does the name Philippe Petit ring a bell? He is a French high-wire artist who gained fame some years ago for his dramatic walks: first in his walk between the towers of Notre Dame cathedral in Paris; then a few years later, between the then Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. He was a thousand feet above ground and he performed for forty-five minutes on an August morning... walking, spinning, dancing and lying down on the wire with no safety net! He was arrested afterwards because, of course, he was not authorized to do such a thing. However, authorities dropped the charges when he agreed to do a children's performance in Central Park.

Risky? He doesn't think so because he had trained and trained for this. However, in an interview he said something fascinating: “Some risks I find impossible to take, particularly personal risks with people... marriage or having children.”

Well, he gets it! Our relationships sometimes feel riskier than walking a tight rope. Why? Because as with any risk, there is always the danger of failure.

Are you with me?

Which is to say, risk and failure are the twins of faith. But here is the most important point: Our faith grows and deepens when we know that failure is a possibility but we take a risky leap of faith anyway and trust that God will see us through.

Do you know about Dyson vacuum cleaners? The man behind the company is a Brit, Sir James Dyson. He is a firm believer in failure. He sees it as an essential part of success.

When Dyson invented his first Dual Cyclone vacuum cleaner, he spent fifteen years creating over five-thousand versions that failed before he made one that worked. He says: “You never learn from success but you do learn from failure.”

Risk and failure are the twins of faith. I think about some of the risky ways we have tested our faith here at First Prez. Hot Dish and Hope was one of those risky ventures where some of our folks had the idea that we could help the homeless and hungry in our city by opening our doors two nights a week to feed more than a hundred guests. Could we do it? Could we sustain it? Ten years and five hundred thousand meals later, I'd say our risk was worth it.

Or when the culture shifted under our feet and some were looking for a more informal worship service with eclectic music. Would buttoned-down, steeped-in-tradition First Presbyterian dare to venture into that world? Nine years later, our Rejoice service has been a meaningful addition to the worship life of our congregation. No risk, no reward.

Or when we decided that our beautiful cathedral with its asbestos ceilings, antiquated heating, air and electrical system needed to be brought into the twentieth century? When we saw that our Smith building was tired and worn out, could we risk a fifteen-million-dollar renovation after we had just survived the Great Recession?

Or when we started the residency program from scratch, or the Session deliberated for months on whether we should give our blessing to same gender marriages, or whether we could reconcile our relationship with emancipated slaves whose church had been born out of our balcony?

Those were all circumstances where risk, faith, failure and trust were front and center.

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And you may have seen the front page of the *News and Record* last Saturday. An apartment complex over on Summit, had been condemned by the city, full of refugees who live on the edge of poverty and hopelessness. It was the same complex where a fire killed a refugee family with children last spring.

The apartments were finally condemned by the city and the tenants had no place to go; no money. No hope.

But if you wonder what difference faith communities make to a city, you saw it last week. A dozen or so First Presbyterians, organized by our Outreach committee, showed up on

Thursday, a day before the tenants were to be put on the street. One of the families our team targeted to help was a from the Congo. The dad, Nsekuey Hitimana, gets on a van at 3:30 every morning and travels almost two hours to work in a chicken processing plant in North Wilkdsboro. His family had nowhere to go.

Our team walked in and what they saw were miserable, horrendous conditions in the condemned apartments. The apartments were dilapidated and in disrepair. One of our members said that when he pulled out kitchen drawers, there were roaches everywhere... not three or four but fifty within a cabinet.

Our team worked all day to move several families over to apartments on the other side of town. Apartments which most us would say are modest but by comparison were palaces.

At our Session meeting this week, one of our elders who was part of that team, read what the dad, Nsekuey Hitimana, (the one who leaves for North Wilkesboro at 3:30 each day) said to our team. He does not speak English but through a translator, said this:

“I am speechless for what these people have done for me. I feel like crying. Please tell them I am a human being. I can’t pay them for all you did, but God will recognize you for what you did for me. God’s blessing for you all, God who gave you the courage to help people like me.”

That what happens when faith becomes risky business.