**Sermon 3/3/19**

**Romans 4:1-25; 5:1-2**

If a doctor suddenly appeared on a television news program announcing,

in an excited voice, a cure for the Paraguayan flu, who would notice?

For his discovery to impress us so deeply that we would seek vaccination,

he would first need to prove the terrible danger of the unknown virus,

and our need for a cure.

Paul's message in Romans is the great news about God's amazing grace:

a complete cure is available to all.

But people won't seek a cure until they know they are ill.

Thus, Romans begins with one of the darkest descriptions in the Bible.

Paul states, "There is no one who is righteous, not even one."

Each of us is doomed to spiritual death unless a cure can be found.

Imagine yourself in a college speech course.

Your assignment: a brief speech on: "The Meaning of Life."

Over late night cups of coffee,

you outline the Christian faith and what it means to you.

You devote a lot of time to this assignment – after all, this speech may

be the only clear expression of faith your classmates will ever hear.

But what if you were asked to write up the speech for your local paper?

Instead of a few dozen listeners, you would have hundreds of readers.

Undoubtedly, you would devote even more time and care to preparation.

Let your imagination run even further.

How would you react if you were asked to adapt this same speech

for a front-page story in the ***New York Times***?

This newspaper has sophisticated, demanding readers.

In writing for them, you would meticulously pore over every word,

polishing phrases, and making sure

your thoughts were complete and well-expressed.

We can see a similar process at work in the apostle Paul's various letters.

Some of his letters were, like a college speech, addressed

to a small cluster of people he knew by name.

Often they consist of warm, personal words of advice, or even fatherly scolding.

But, Romans -- the very title of this book conjures up images

of the powerful empire that ruled the western world.

To people of Paul's time, Rome was the center of the world in every way:

law, culture, power, and learning.

A letter to this sophisticated audience had to be impressive indeed.

In Romans, Paul brilliantly set down the whole scope of Christian doctrine,

which, at that time, was still being passed along orally from town to town.

Paul wanted to convince those demanding readers that

Jesus Christ held the answers to all of life's important questions.

People sometimes ask: "What one book would you most want to have with you,

if you were stranded on a deserted island?"

Of course the classic reply is: "Thomas's Guide to Practical Shipbuilding."

But if asked the same question about a single book of the Bible,

many Christians would choose Romans.

Compact enough to fit on one spread of a modern newspaper,

Yet Romans manages to encompass all the essentials of the Christian faith.

Despite its thoroughness, however,

Romans does not read like a dry book of theology.

Great revivals in church history have been spawned by a study of this book. Augustine, Martin Luther, and John Wesley,

all trace their spiritual renewals to a reading of Romans.

It gives the apostle Paul's final answer to questions about the "meaning of life".

Romans is a book to savor, slowly and carefully. Paul is developing an argument,

and his logic unfolds thought by thought from the very first chapter.

He begins by showing the need for the good news of the gospel.

He continues to discuss the working out of the gospel in a Christian's life.

He links his argument to the Old Testament history of the Jews.

From there, he proceeds to give practical advice on specific problems.

It has no equal as a concise, reasonable statement of the Christian faith.

Paul's message to the Romans, changed Martin Luther forever.

After he finally understood the phrase: "righteousness of God," Luther said,

"I felt myself to be reborn & to have gone through open doors into paradise.

The whole of scripture took on a new meaning.

This passage of Paul became to me a gateway to heaven."

Faith is the only thing which brings grace.

Grace means a gift, a free gift, a gift given without expecting anything in return.

It means favor, approval, goodwill, assistance, help, and kindness.

And this grace is freely given to anyone

who cries to God to have mercy and to forgive their sin.

Faith assures us that the promise of eternal life is for everyone, it is available to all.

Paul goes to great lengths in to make a theological point.

He traces the Jewish heritage back to Abraham,

who lived hundreds of years before Moses and the Old Testament law. Abraham, says Paul, pleased God exactly as we do: through faith.

The Old Testament law was never meant to bridge the gap between God and people. Only Jesus could do that. Paul stresses that the law was given,

not to bring about redemption, but to point up the need for it.

Faith is more than just belief. It is living response of trust, obedience, and loyalty

to the Creator who has a claim on one's existence.

It takes faith to believe the unbelievable.

Faith is not simply believing in God. Faith is believing God.

Abram believed God, and God credited it to him as righteousness.

Despite the good news that God gives new life free of charge,

we humans have a hard time accepting such a gift.

We, by nature want to earn, or deserve, or buy, what we get.

Being "counted" as righteousness is not from obedience, but from the sincere

affirmation and acceptance that God can, and will, do what he promised.

Righteousness is not from works of obedience, but from faith and trust.

This is absolutely key for our understanding

of how a relationship with God starts and continues.

We desperately want to "do" something that will cause God to bless us.

We go to church. We carry a big Bible. We tithe faithfully.

We cajole God, and even demand things based on a "contract" that we have with him,

where he is obligated to bless us according to our desires.

It doesn't work that way.

God owes us nothing because we did no work to earn his favor.

"Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed…"

There is our answer.

God is looking for his children to have a different kind of hope from the world.

Ours is to be a believing hope.

Faith doesn't ignore reality.

Faith doesn't pretend a problem doesn't exist.

Faith is facing the facts without being discouraged by them.

Faith it knowing the problem,

but believing God is working out His good through it.

For us humans, waiting is very, very difficult.

We need to learn to keep faith, while we're waiting upon God.

Faith is expecting God to act and do good even if it's not the way we planned it.

Our faith isn't seen after the fact, it's seen before it.

It is thanking God for His deliverance even in the midst of the storm.

The power of faith, enables us to believe in God's dream,

to be willing to take risks,

to be a people of great expectations,

and refusing to give up.

God showed his love for us in this way:

Jesus died for us while we were still sinners.

Ponder the achievement of God.

He does not condone our sin. Nor does he compromise his standard.

He doesn't ignore our rebellion. Nor does he relax his demands.

Rather than dismiss our sin, He assumes our sin and, incredibly sentences himself.

God's holiness is honored, our sin is punished, and we are redeemed.

God does what we cannot do,

so we can be what we dare not dream: Perfect Before God.

We are saved by faith, and we receive God's forgiveness by faith.

There is only one way to be saved, and that's by faith in God's plan.

Faith is believing God.

When he says he loves us, faith enables us to believe him.

When he says we are forgiven, faith lets us accept what he says.

When he says we will have eternal life, faith makes it possible for us to trust him.

AMEN