

Romans 4:13-25, Mark 8:31-38 and Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

There is an interesting story about Abraham Lincoln, something that happened before he was elected president, when he lived in Illinois as a young lawyer. One day an angry man stormed into his law office demanding that Lincoln sue a broke man who owed him \$2.50. "Make him pay!" Well, Lincoln didn't want anything of the sort to happen. The debtor couldn't pay the \$2.50, the creditor didn't need the money, and, Lincoln thought, society shouldn't be run by either such greed or such insensitivity. So Lincoln attempted to decline the case.

Unfortunately, the man kept pressing, and since Lincoln was the only lawyer available, he was forced to serve the suit. First, though, he charged the man \$10 for legal fees. Then he brought the defendant in, paid him \$5.00 for his time, and asked if the charges were accurate. The man with the debt readily agreed, and out of his newly gotten \$5, paid the \$2.50 he owed. Everyone was satisfied, including the irate plaintiff, who never realized that he spent \$10 to collect \$2.50!

Now think of it this way: A man with no credit is burdened by a debt he could never repay. Along comes an Advocate he can't hire to resolve a matter he can't win. Suddenly, in a transaction he could never accomplish, the debt is gone, the creditor has disappeared, and the man has money in his pocket! All he had to do was agree to the terms.

So it is with faith, says Paul in Romans 4, as he reminds us of the journey and faith of Abraham. The biblical promise God made promised offspring beyond the number of the stars in the sky, a number too large to count and also the promise of possessing the land of Canaan, thereby blessing other nations. Paul tells us the promise came not through the law but through the righteousness of faith.

If the promise to Abraham was extended only to those who fulfilled the law, then it would be a short-lived promise – for no human being is capable of fulfilling all of God's law. And if God had intended the law to be the yardstick used to measure those who would be inheritors of the promise, then the "promise" is without substance, and faith is a dead issue. Of course this isn't the logical conclusion as Paul tells us in verse 16. The divine promise is a result of the outpouring of God's grace, allowing Paul to make a remarkable claim: Since faith, not the law, is God's criterion for extending the promise, the promise can be extended to any and to all who "share the faith of Abraham". Abraham had great faith; he went where God told him to go without knowing where he was heading or what he would encounter along the way.

When Abraham was 99, and Sarah 90, their bodies were unable to bring forth life by their own volition; they were reproductively dead. It was then that God brought forth Isaac, a new life, a miracle child. Out of Abraham's faith came a hope that could face down a "no hope" situation. The facts confronting Abraham were not very hopeful. He was "as good as dead" and Sarah, his wife, was 90 and had been unable to conceive even when both she and Abraham were young. Nevertheless, Paul writes, Abraham's

faith "did not weaken," nor did his trust in God's ability to fulfill the promise ever "waver." It is this attitude of faithfulness, buoyed by hope, that resulted in Abraham's faith being "reckoned to him as righteousness" (v. 22).

Paul concludes his argument by claiming that faithful Abraham's example takes on a new, deeper relevance for first-century Christians than it always had for Jews. Just as Abraham believed God could bring new life out of his old "dead" body, a similar "righteousness" will be "reckoned" to those who now believe that God raised Jesus from the dead. Paul's last verse reflects the language and imagery of the "Suffering Servant" portions in Isaiah 52.

Jesus is alluding to the suffering servant in today's gospel reading, when he talks openly about his suffering and dying, yet he includes the often overlooked statement that he will rise again. Peter doesn't understand and he wants nothing to do with that. He wants a powerful king who will take over and rule in the very near future. That is what is meant when Peter rebukes Jesus in today's gospel reading. Peter told Jesus that what he was saying about dying was wrong, that he shouldn't talk that way. Jesus' response was to tell Peter that he was tempting him in ways that were like the devil had tempted him earlier in the chapter. The devil had tempted Jesus with worldly power that required no sacrifice. That wasn't God's will. God's will required a sacrifice that would put an end to sin sacrifices. The image of the suffering servant is exactly who Jesus portrayed.

He didn't want to keep that a secret either. Jesus called the crowds to gather around him and told them that they too would need to become a suffering servant to follow him. Jesus told them all they would need to pick up their cross and follow him, to give up their life to gain their life. What would it profit them to gain the whole world and lose their soul? That was what Jesus was tempted to do by the devil and again by Peter: to gain the world but lose his soul. He knew that wasn't God's will, and there was nothing Jesus wanted to do more than to do God's will to save humanity. After that mission was completed, he would ascend to the right hand of God to become an advocate for humanity.

We, who have no way of paying the debt of our sin, have an advocate who intercedes on our behalf. Without Jesus there is nothing we can do to appear sin free before God. But Jesus takes away our sin debt. Jesus agreed to do this; it was nothing he was forced into doing. Jesus chose to follow God's will so that we can live.

That doesn't mean we have the freedom to live a life of intentional sin. It means that when we do sin, through Jesus we have the power to turn from the sin and be forgiven. We can try to have everything the world offers, but if the world becomes more important to us than Jesus then we will lose our promise of eternal life. We will not be left to suffer and die without the hope of the resurrection but there is no resurrection without suffering and death. Are you willing to forgo the instant gratification we are tempted by in this world in order to gain eternity? All Glory be to God.