

March 13, 2022

Texts: Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Philippians 3:17-4:1

Title: "When We Are Uncertain About the Future"

There's a story of a priest who had an irrational fear that his legs were going to become paralyzed. One night while he was at a dinner party he reached down and pinched his leg. He couldn't feel anything. He was alarmed. Out loud he exclaimed, "Oh, no. It's just as I feared. I'm totally without feeling below my waist." A lady sitting next to him turned and smiled. "If it's any comfort father," she said, "the leg you pinched was mine."

All kinds of things can hit our panic button. I've mentioned before how often the words "Fear not!" appear in the bible. The very first time God says "Fear not" to anyone in the Bible is in our lesson for today from Genesis.

Abram ("exalted father"), or Abraham ("father of many") as he would later be known, has returned from a great military victory over four kings from Mesopotamia. These kings had banded together for the purpose of military conquest and had kidnapped Abram's nephew Lot. Abram is not only successful against in battle but he's starting to acquire wealth and stature in this new land to which God has called him. But in spite of all this his heart is uncertain about his future and about the God who had called him.

Can you relate to that? There are some good things happening but you're still worried? It wouldn't be surprising. Let me count the ways. Maybe you are trying to save for retirement because you know that Social Security isn't enough to live on but

your investments keep getting hit in the stock markets and there's a lot of uncertainty. Maybe you can relate.

One reason Abram was uncertain was because he and his wife were childless. And that's hard if you want children and don't have any but perhaps even harder in Abram's time because children were needed to help gather crops or tend animals. They were the means of preserving the family inheritance not to mention they would care for their parents in their old age...a real concern for Abram and his wife, Sarai.

Of course, some of you **HAVE** children and that weighs on you too. A man was asked by his tax preparer how many dependents he had. "Eight," he replied. Children are both a source of joy and of sleepless nights. What's their future gonna be like? Will they be safe? Will they resist the temptations out there? What kind of world will they inherit? Teenagers have their own fears for instance moving to a new school. Are they going to accept me there? For those getting near to the end of high school, it might be, "What college is going to accept me?" or "What kind of job can I get in today's economy?"

And then a little later in life we worry, "What if I lose my job? Or "My family seems to be coming apart. What if I end up alone?" "How long will my health hold out? Can I make it without being a burden to my children?" Let's quit before we all get depressed, but this is life as it is and as it was for Abram in many ways too.

**Everyone of every age and time knows what it is to live with anxiety.** The word "anxiety" comes from the Greek word *ananke*, meaning "throat" or "to press

together.” *Ananke* was the name of the Greek god of constraint who presided over slavery. *Ananke* was the word used for the yokes or rings on the necks of slaves. The connection between the words *ananke* and anxiety are obvious. Anxiety holds you back, takes you by the throat, and chains you like a slave. The word “angina,” which is a tightness in the chest, also comes from that word.

I know of only two ways to deal with the uncertainty of life and the fear we feel about them. **The first is to face up to them.** Have you ever known someone who was afraid of going to the doctor because they were afraid that something was wrong and they didn’t want to have it confirmed? You gotta go and face it. It’s the only way to feel better. Author Steve Goodier said, “Face that fear head-on, whatever it is, and embrace it. You may be surprised at how quickly it slips away and at how confident you begin to feel.”

Most of us would prefer to avoid the things we’re anxious about. When we’re afraid of things, the brain tries to help us avoid facing the fear. That’s one reason people become addicted to things. A particular escape from the feelings of fear worked once or twice and the mind then urges us on to keep doing it to avoid the pain. Of course, this pattern of avoidance ends up creating more problems for ourselves and others in the long run.

**The other vital thing to do when facing fear is to fall back on our faith.** “The word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: ‘Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.’” After hearing Abram’s uncertainty over his

childless state, God takes him outside and says, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” And the writer of Genesis records, “Abram believed the Lord...” That’s a life-changing statement of faith: “Abram believed the Lord...”

Do you believe the Lord? Do you trust Him? Sometimes mistaken ideas about faith and about God can cause us to run away from God instead of toward him.

A pastor talked about how as a child he sat through many long and boring worship services. He says he couldn’t help envying his unchurched friends. One Sunday, he slipped out of church and went to the candy store and spent his offering on Tootsie rolls. He returned to church just in time to hear the sermon about Ananias and Sapphira. Do you remember that story? It’s from the book of Acts about how they lied about their offering and were struck dead because of it. Going home this little boy prayed fervently for forgiveness for spending his offering on candy. He stayed up all night chanting, “I love Jesus, I love Jesus,” in hopes that this would convince God to spare his life.

It’s sad that our faith, rather than giving us hope and freedom to become all we can be, can sometimes add to our distress. That child hadn’t yet experienced the love and peace that God would one day bring into his life. So he was afraid. A mature faith understands that though life is hard, we’re never beyond God’s loving and gracious care. Amen.