



# FROM THE PULPIT

## *North Shore Congregational Church*

---

### **“The Absurdity of it All (aka – The ‘Why?’)”**

**Rev. Dr. Martin W. Hall – Preaching**

*Genesis 15: 1-6; Romans 4: 13-25*

*August 9, 2015*

#### **Sermon Summary:**

*‘Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.’ It is hard to imagine the promises of God, and in the midst of despair, it can be even harder to imagine how those promises could be fulfilled. In Abram, however, we see that faithfulness is not in understanding God’s promises, but in trusting that God will be faithful to them.*

There’s a story of a man who was out hiking when he slipped and fell off the edge of a cliff. Just as he fell, he reached out and managed to get ahold of a branch sticking out from an old bush. As he dangled off the edge of the cliff, holding on to the branch with all his might, he cried out, “Is there anyone out there who can help me, is there anyone up there?” A calm, powerful, voice came from the sky, “Yes, there is!” The hiker pleaded, “Can you help me? Can you help me?” The voice replied, “Of course I can. Simply let go of the bush and everything will turn out just fine.” There was a tense pause for a moment, then the hiker yelled out, “Is there anyone else up there?”

I’m not sure there are many things, in faith, that are more counterintuitive than the call upon us to trust in God. I stood up here, last week, and I sought to remind all of us of our need to trust in God in our times of struggle and strife – our times of transition and unrest. But the truth, I know, is that there are few things we are asked to do in our discipleship that go more against our daily experience – that stand more in contrast to our societal conditioning – than being asked to believe in the promises that God has made. The simple truth is that we are, every day, becoming an increasingly skeptical society. Our trust in a vast array of things has eroded consistently, and we are sinking perpetually deeper into the realms of distrust and incredulity.

We are barraged daily, it seems, with evidence of why we simply can’t trust the world around us.

- Sports fans are inundated with stories of heroes who have drawn their attention, inspired their fanhood, and broken records of their respective sports – many of whom have now long since been shown to have done so with the aid of steroids, human growth hormones or any of a dozen other illicit chemical supplements. And, now, we can't trust any of the heroes, any of the records, or any of the stories because we don't what's real and what's not.
- We turn to the leaders who guide our cities, our states and our country – those who have been elected to serve the people and protect the values of the Constitution – and we hear stories of illicit affairs, lying, deceit, bribery, and any of a thousand other forms of corruption you might be able to imagine.
- We look to those same leaders in a time of crisis and see that political posturing and campaigning repeatedly and almost universally take precedence over working to solve the ills of our communities.
- We put our lives in the hands of airline pilots only to discover that the flight was delayed because the crew stayed too long at the bar.
- We look to our families and our marriages and are perpetually reminded of the astronomic rates of divorce and family break-ups that plague our nation.
- We turn to churches and we see Ministers caught in affairs and sexual abuse, church leaders wrapped up in agendas and manipulation, and church members battered about by the politics, gamesmanship and exploitation that creeps into the lives of our communities of faith.

And then – in the midst of these constant examples of why we should not trust anyone – I have the gall to stand up here, as the new guy who barely knows where the light switches are, and tell you that you need to trust in God. And, yes, I know how absurd that is. So, that's why today is the 'Why?' Last week, I told you that we need to trust in God. This week, I will tell you why I know you can! Then, next week, we'll wrap up this little mini-series as we talk about how.

Now, you all need to understand that I am an optimist and a trusting person by nature. To this day I believe that all of the scenarios and examples that I listed, at least most of them, are the exception and not the rule. But, I go through them to point out that it is more than understandable that our inherent level of trust in the society that surrounds us is declining. I could go on with this list, and when you start adding job losses, foreclosures, financial distress, global unrest, crime rates in Milwaukee, floods in Africa, shootings in Tennessee, and everything that barrages us on a daily basis, it is understandable that some people may have reached that point at which they simply feel that there is nothing in which anyone can put any trust or confidence anymore.

I can't help, in the midst of that, to think back to a conversation regarding trust that I had with my parents as a teen. As I entered into my teen years, my parents sat me down for a conversation and they laid out, for me, the basic premise on which they were going to treat me. They said, 'It's pretty simple. We are going to trust you until you give a reason not to.'

I think that, in many ways, this is the premise in which we approach life. People want to trust, they do trust, until the world around them gives them reason not to. But, the simple truth is that we've been given more than enough reasons for skepticism – our doubt has been sufficiently

justified – that some people have reached that point in which they might say that there is nothing in which anyone can put any trust or confidence anymore. But, what I want to suggest is that it's precisely that level of skepticism and distrust to which Abraham's story speaks clearly.

I want you to try to imagine Abraham's circumstance at the point of this story that we shared this morning. He has been a devoted follower of God. He has lived by the Law in the best way he knew how. But, he has been neglected that one thing that mattered so much in the patriarchal society in which he lived – he doesn't have a son. In his culture, carrying on the family line, bearing the blessing of the father, mattered as much as just about anything. But, Sarah was barren – she couldn't have children. They sorrowed over that, they wished they could have had a family together, but at this age it pretty much was what it was.

That is, of course, until God came around and promised Abraham, years beyond any reasonable age – after decades of Sarah's barrenness – that they would have son and that Abraham, through his trust and faith, would be a father to many nations. Can you imagine how skeptical you would be? At that age, with that history, in those circumstances – to be told that you would have a child, and that through that child you would become the father of a people! It is the epitome of absurdity – a promise so ridiculous that Sarah laughed in the face of it. But still, despite that absurdity, it happened! Through God's promise and Abraham's trust in God's promise – it happened!

I love the way Paul describes this event in his letter to the Romans.

“<sup>18</sup>Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." <sup>19</sup>Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. <sup>20</sup>Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, <sup>21</sup>being fully persuaded that God had the power to do what he had promised.” (Romans 4: 18-21)

“Being fully persuaded that God had the power to do what he had promised.” What a great line! Abraham trusted in God's commitment, and through that trust God's faithfulness to His promises was realized. This is a recurring story of our faith – absurd and unbelievable promises realized through the trust of the people and the faithfulness of God. It is the essence of so many of the narratives of our faith.

- Noah was promised that there would be a flood – and, through his trust in God's absurd promise, a new promise arose in which God pledged to never flood the world again.
- Moses was promised that, despite his impediments in speech and his reluctance to lead, he would be the one to bring the Israelites out of Egypt – and through his trust in God's absurd promise, he led them to edge of the river and sent them across to the Promised Land.
- Joshua was promised that, by marching forward with trumpets, and dancing around the city like a band of idiots, Jericho would be delivered into their hands – and through his trust in God's absurd promise, it was.

- Peter was promised that, in moving beyond the Jewish world and taking the gospel to the Gentiles, countless more would come to the faith – and through his trust in God’s absurd promise, he carried the gospel to countless people, cities and generations.
- Paul was promised that the one he’d been persecuting was the one he was now going to serve – and through his trust in God’s absurd promise, he sparked a revolution of evangelism in the budding Christian faith.

Our faith is the recurring story of the absurdity of God’s promises and the miraculous manner in which those promises are realized through the faith and trust of God’s people. But, the wonderful news, in that, is that these absurd promises that have made up the very story of our faith are now ours to receive.

- We have the promise that we will never be alone in our distress.
- We have the promise that God will give us the strength to conquer our battles.
- We have the promise that God will guide us through the wandering times of our lives.
- We have the promise that God will carry us in our times of need, protect us in our times of fear, uplift us in our times of sorrow and inspire us in the face of opportunity.
- We have the promise that no matter what we’ve done and who we’ve been, we will be forgiven through the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ and will find our place in life everlasting in the eternal glory and love of God.

That’s the why! We live in a skeptical society in which it can feel, at times, as though there is nothing in which anyone can place any trust or confidence anymore. But, we also live in a faith that is the very essence of absurd promises being realized through the trust of God’s people. We live in a faith that we are told in Hebrews is defined by, “being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” We live in a God who has shown again and again that no matter how battered the world may leave us, God is faithful, and God’s promises will be fulfilled.

We live in a world in which we have an understandable level of doubt and dubiousness when it comes to placing our trust in this world. The extent of that skepticism will vary for each of us, but I think it’s there, at least a little, in all of us. But, I would suggest that it is in those very times – in those moments in which we wonder if we can trust anything in this world – that we ought remember that we aren’t asked, ever, to put our trust in this world. We are asked to follow the example and faith of Abraham, to put our trust in God, and to, like him, be fully persuaded that, indeed, God has the power to do what God has promised to do.