

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Rev. Dr. John Judson
“The People of God: The League of Extraordinary Followers”
June 22, 2014
Genesis 12:10-20;
Romans 6:1-11

He was a standup kind of guy. Abraham was one of those standup guys that we all want to have around. And how do we know that he was a standup guy? We know because he only gave his wife away twice. A lesser man might have given his wife away three, maybe even four times. But not Abraham. No, he only gave away his wife twice, each time in order to protect his own life. In our morning's story we read that Abraham went down into Egypt in order to escape a famine. On the way he realized that his wife Sarah, being beautiful, might cause him some issues, such as the loss of his life. So rather than risk everything he gave her away...and she was taken into Pharaoh's house. Granted God was not all that pleased with this arrangement and caused Pharaoh to return her, but even then Abraham got to keep all of the livestock which Pharaoh had given him in exchange for Sarah. Not a bad deal. Ok, so this is not Abraham's best moment. But what I hope that we will see is that in this story there is both good news and bad news.

The good news is that we discover that Abraham is just an ordinary guy and in fact makes us look good. I don't know about you, but the impression that I was always given growing up was that all of the great Biblical characters were perfect people walking around with these halos hovering over their heads. Everything that they did was exactly what God wanted them to do. We were taught to revere them and seek to emulate their lives. As we see in this story and one other about Abraham is that there is much about his life that we do not want to emulate. While he certainly listened to God and was willing to leave his home and kin to seek the place where God would have him live, along the way his life was sometimes less than exemplary. What this means for us though is that if God can use an ordinary guy who gives away his wife, twice, in order to save himself then perhaps God can use us ordinary people as well. So, as I said there is good news in here for us ordinary people.

The bad news, remember I said that there is both good news and bad in this story, is that we discover Abraham is an ordinary guy and in fact makes us look good. I know that I had just told you that that was the good news, but it is also the bad news. It is the bad news because it allows us to look at Abraham, and in seeing that we are in many ways better than he is, be satisfied with our ordinariness. In other words, when we look at Abraham we can say, “Hey, I have never given away my wife, or my husband in order to save myself. I must be pretty good.” This sense encourages us to be OK with being just OK. After all, if we are better than one of the great patriarchs of the Bible then we must be good enough. Ordinariness becomes the watch word. We no longer have to strive for being better than we are. It would be like the San Antonio Spurs, when they lost to the Heat last year, saying, hey guys we made it to the finals. That is all we need. We don't need to strive to be champions...see I did manage to get a Spurs reference in the sermon. That is the bad news that even as ordinary people God can use us.

This was the situation Paul faced when he was writing to the church at Rome. Evidently this was a church, like most of the other churches to whom he wrote, which believed that being ordinary was good enough. In the section of the letter we read this morning, what we see is that Paul makes it clear that when Jesus Christ begins to work in our life, that we become more than ordinary. We become extraordinary. We become extraordinary because the old person that we once were is crucified in Christ

and dies. He writes, *“What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death...”* (Romans 6:1-4a) Paul reminds his readers, and reminds us, that something remarkable has happened to us. The old ordinary person no longer lives. That person is gone. And for Paul this is not some metaphorical change...it is an objective reality of being changed from one kind of person to another.

The second half of this spiritual equation is just as important...that in Christ not only does the old self die but a new self is born. *“But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”* (Romans 6:8-11) In other words, when the ordinary self dies we are given a new spiritual self. We become more than ordinary people. We become people capable of living lives oriented to God. We become capable of loving, serving, caring, sharing and sacrificing just as did Jesus. We become capable of being extraordinary people.

Let me be clear at this point, that when Paul links this death and resurrection to baptism, he is not suggesting that baptism is not a magic event that causes this death and resurrection to happen. Baptism is instead the recognition of what God has already done for us in Jesus Christ. So when we baptized our three newest members of the universal church of Jesus Christ this morning, we did so believing that God was already changing them. God was already making them capable of being extraordinary people.

In 2003 a movie entitled, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, reached the movie theatres. Based on a comic book series of the same name, it was not an extraordinary movie. Nonetheless it was the story of a group of men and a lady, who while on the outside appeared to be rather ordinary...and in fact sort of dysfunctionally ordinary, like Abraham, were in fact extraordinary individuals. Each had a gift or a talent which could be used for good or evil. They chose to use them for good...and in good movie fashion saved the world...for the moment. As we move through this sermon series on the People of God, what I hope is that we will see ourselves as the League of Extraordinary Followers. For on the outside we look like ordinary people...yet because of what Jesus Christ has done for us we are no longer ordinary but extraordinary and the task to which we have been set is to be part of Christ's world-saving community; showing love, grace, compassion and care for the world as we work for justice and transformation both here and around the world.

My challenge to you then this morning is to ask yourselves, how does my life reflect the fact that I am part of the League of Extraordinary Followers of Jesus Christ?