

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Rooted and Grounded in Love: Believing is Seeing”

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September 20, 2015

Galatians 3:1-9, Genesis 12:1-9

I really didn't believe them. They kept telling me that it was the most beautiful building in the world...in fact one of the most beautiful sights in the world. But I didn't believe them. After all I was fortunate enough to have seen some pretty cool stuff in my life. But about ten years or so ago on a beautiful, clear morning I turned a corner of some souvenir shops and there in front of me was the Taj Mahal. It took my breath away. I had gone to India with a mission group to visit some projects my former church was supporting. One of the perks was going to see the Taj Mahal. I have to say it was not high on my list of things to do, but what the heck. When would I ever get back to India? When I saw it though I realized why it was one of the seven wonders of the modern world. In this case seeing was believing. It was indeed, at least in my opinion, the most beautiful building I had ever seen. Have any of you had the same kind of experience? Someone keeps telling you about something and it is not until you see it that you believe them? Well if you have, then you get what Paul was trying to do in this letter, he was asking the people to remember what they saw so that they would believe him.

Before I jump into that I want to bring everyone up to speed. Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia is in some ways a heavy weight boxing match between Paul and his opponents that I call the circumcision party. What they are fighting over is the entry requirements into the Jesus' community. Paul is arguing for a barrier free entry...you want to follow Jesus? Come on in. The Circumcision Party on the other hand wants a high barrier...that one must be circumcised or ritualized into the community. This matters to Paul because, as I said last week, the entry requirements often set the culture of the institution...which can be seen in the arrests made of a large group of young men in a fraternity at Baruch College, for their brutal initiation and killing of one of their pledges. Paul's on the surface argument in this portion of the letter then is this; the Galatians, who entered into the Jesus' community through Paul's barrier free manner, had seen amazing proofs of God's presence including miracles. In other words Paul argues, you should believe in my way because you have seen results.

It is at this point that many people stop looking at the text. We now know that in this case seeing is believing. But if we end here we will miss the heart of what Paul is trying to tell us. We will miss that not only is seeing believing, but that believing is seeing. Let me say that again, believing is seeing. This in fact is the heart of Paul's message...that all of the good things that we witness as followers of God in Jesus Christ, come through believing. But in order to fully understand this we must understand what believing means. So here goes....imagine, if you will, one of your friends comes to you and says that he has a sure thing; that there is a horse named Flash-in-the-Pan, in the fifth race at Pimlico this Thursday and that if we bet everything we have we will win big. One way of using the concept of believing would be to say to your friend, “Thanks, and I am thrilled you have a sure thing...in fact I believe you, but I will hang on to my money.” Another way of believing would be to say, “This is great,” and then you sell all you have, go to the betting window and place everything on Flash-in-the-Pan, in the fifth race at Pimlico. This is believing in the Biblical sense. It is faith with feet.

We can see this faith with feet in the Abraham story. When God called Abraham, Abraham didn't say to God, "Hey this is great that you want me to go to a new land and through me bless the world. Let me put that on my calendar for the fourth of never." No, instead Abraham got his family together and they undertook the journey to which God had called them. This is belief. It is faith with feet and where this led Abraham was to see the Promises of God come to fruition. What we have to realize about this story is just how amazing this is. When God made this promise to Abraham that through his offspring all of the earth would be blessed, Abraham and Sarah had no children. The fulfillment of the promise seemed impossible. But even when they were, according to the story, beyond the age of having children and before the age of the little blue pill, Abraham and Sarah conceived a child, Isaac. What this points to is the fact that God's promises are present, but it is our believing, our putting feet to our faith that gives them birth and allows them to be made real. It is in believing that we see. And this is Paul's point to the Galatians...they are living the same promise-believing-seeing life as was Abraham.

We see this in verse two, "Let me ask you only this, did you receive the Spirit by works of the Law (meaning through being circumcised) or by hearing with faith?" In other words did the Spirit promised by the crucified and risen Jesus come to you through some sort of religious ritual or did it come because you believed, because you were willing to acknowledge the promise of the Spirit and then act upon it? The obvious answer for Paul was that the promise of the Spirit became a reality through believing...and the Spirit not only brought miraculous events but it allowed the Galatians to "experience many things" which we can take to mean love, joy, peace, patience and the other fruits which the Spirit brings. Paul is reminding the Galatians that believing is seeing, and so one can have a barrier free faith, remembering the cause of the letter, because ultimately it is believing that allows God's promises in Jesus Christ to become realities.

If this seems a bit cryptic, let me offer you a down to earth, Lucas film image from a little known movie called Star Wars. In this movie there is an ordinary young man named Luke Skywalker. His parents are deceased and he lives with his aunt and uncle...sound familiar? Anyway the crux of the film is that he has been given a gift of something called the force. It is within him and is of little or no use. And for it to be of any use he has to believe that it is real...which takes him at least a couple of movies to do. Yet once he believes it is real and then acts to put it to use...the universe is saved because he blows up the death star...yadda, yadda, yadda.

This is where we find ourselves. We are those in whom God has poured out God's infinite love in Jesus Christ and we are those in whom the Spirit now lives and breathes. The question is, will we believe it? Will we allow our faith to have feet, and act upon these gifts? For it is easy to not believe these two promises. It is easy to see Christianity as a decent set of moral guidelines for ourselves, our children and our grandchildren. But we are asked to believe more than that. We are asked to believe as did the Galatians these promises of God's gifts of love and Spirit are real and then act upon them. My challenge to you then is this, to ask, "How am I believing God and acting upon the life transforming love and Spirit that God has given me?"