



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### Reckoned to Us Romans 4:16-25

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For my birthday, one of my school friends gave me a recording of the radio broadcast of Douglas Adams' "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy" on a set of LPs. It's a science fiction comedy, as the narrator explains at the beginning, and it's the story of this electronic book-like thing called *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. But as the narrator promptly explains: "To tell the story of the book, it's best to tell the story of some of the minds behind it. A human, from the planet Earth, was one of them, though as our story opens, he no more knows his destiny than a tea-leaf knows the history of the East India Company." I listened to those albums so many times that bits and pieces, like the narrator's prologue, are now forever stuck in my head. And this bit about needing to tell the story of the people who are part of the bigger story and the bit about this human—his name happens to be Arthur—having no idea of his own place in it, well, it's kept popping into my head as I've been working through Romans 4.

Brothers and Sisters, as Christians we are caught up in a story that's much bigger than we are. To understand it, we've got to hear the stories of the people who are actors in it. This is what St. Paul's been doing in telling us about Abraham over the first half of the chapter. And it's important we do this. It's important that we get a firm grasp on the overarching story, on the big picture, because—it's sad to say—many Christians never do and, like Arthur, we "no more know our destiny than a tea-leaf knows the history of the East India Company". St. Paul's been writing to a group of Christian, some of them Jews and some of the

Gentiles. They've been struggling to understand their place in the story of redemption and so what Paul has done over these four chapters is to sort of draw them a map. He started back in Chapter 1 by explaining the predicament of the human race. Our root problem is that we are "ungodly". We are idolaters. We've rebelled against our Creator and replaced him with other things—worshipping false gods and worshipping ourselves and refusing to give him the honour and glory he is due. Paul takes us back to Genesis, where we see humanity created to bear God's image. To bear God's image means to be God's representatives on earth. The Garden was his temple. Pagans built temples and then placed carved images in those temples to represent the god's rule, dominion, and sovereignty in that place. But instead of placing a carved image of himself in his temple, the Lord placed humanity—the man and the woman. To live before the face of God, to serve him as our King, to have dominion and to care for his temple, to be fruitful and to multiply so that we must always be growing the temple until it fills the whole earth, that is the vocation for which God created us. That's what it means to be truly and fully human. But we humans, instead, grasped for divinity ourselves. We rejected our Creator. We rejected his goodness, his love, and his wisdom and, instead of becoming gods ourselves, we fell to something lower than the humanity God gave us. In Romans 1 Paul singled out homosexuality as the sin that represents just how far we've fallen, because it represents the rejection of the very first command God gave to humanity: Be fruitful and multiply. God not only created us to live in his presence and to share in his life, he gifted us with the ability to create life ourselves, but we've instead chosen death and non-life. Even amongst heterosexuals, we've increasingly rejected God's gift of fruitfulness.

The good news, as Paul explains, is that God does not leave us mired in death and captive to our own

ungodliness. He goes on to tell us the story of Abraham. God called Abraham out of the midst of a pagan people. Just like everyone else, Abraham was ungodly, an idolater, a sinner. And, Paul stresses, that's precisely why God called him. God is in the business of making the ungodly to be godly. He's in the business of making saints out of sinners. He's in the business of giving life where there is only death. Abraham followed God in faith and became the first member of God's covenant family. Paul takes us back to Genesis 15 and reminds us that on account of his faith in the promise of God, Abraham was counted as righteous. Remember that for Paul, to be counted righteous means to be counted as part of God's family—to be part of this people that God is setting right and making godly again, but also this people through whom God is working to restore his Creation. Paul stresses to the people in the Roman church that Abraham was counted as part of this family by *faith*, because it was at this point that the Jews had got the story, the big picture wrong. They saw themselves as the privileged few whom God had set apart and the rest of the world be damned—literally. This is where the problems cropped up in Rome and in other churches, too. Jewish believers were struggling to understand how Gentiles could fit into the family. Did they have to be circumcised and start following the law that God had given to mark out the Jews as his people? And many of the Gentiles wondered how the Jews fit in. Was God done with them?

Many people see Paul's telling of the story of Abraham as a sort of proof-text he uses to prove his point that salvation is by faith and not be the law or by works. And while it's true that salvation is by faith, that's not really Paul's point here. Paul tells us Abraham's story in order to draw us a map or in order to paint the big picture of redemptive history so that he can then point to it and show these Christians—both Jews and Gentiles—"You are here". And that's where

we're at as we come to the end of Romans 4 and to the end of the first part of letter.

In Paul's day, there was an idea beginning to get traction that Abraham was counted to be part of the covenant family because of his faithfulness to the law—that the law had been revealed to him hundreds of years before it was ever given to Moses at Mt. Sinai. Somehow Abraham learned of this law, started following it, and that prompted the Lord to choose him. Over the last two weeks we've seen how Paul has told Abraham's story in such a way as to prove that this idea is pure hogwash. Abraham had no knowledge of the law. In fact, when God found him and called him, he was an ungodly pagan—just like so many of the Gentiles in the church who had so recently heard the good news about Jesus. Abraham was counted righteous because he *believed* in God's crazy promise that he would make this childless old man with an elderly and barren wife great and that they would have children as numerous as the stars. Last week we saw Paul explain that while the Jews had become fixated on their little piece of real estate in the Holy Land, God's promise to Abraham was that he would inherit the whole earth and that the *nations* would be his heirs. God's promise to Abraham was an enormous promise—a world encompassing promise—because it looks forward to humanity and to creation being restored to the vocation and purpose for which God created them. And the fulfilment of this global promise is possible because those who are Abraham's children are not his children by blood, but because they have followed in his footsteps of faith. Let's pick up now at Romans 4:16-17. Paul writes:

**That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants**

Membership in the covenant family depends on faith. It has to. The Jews were convinced that it rested on faithfulness to the law, but Paul has stressed two problems with that. First, from a practical standpoint, if membership in the covenant family came by faithfulness to the law, then there would be no covenant family. Even the Jews knew that none of them were entirely faithful. No, it *has* to rest on *grace*. But, more importantly, grace is the only thing that gets the big picture right. God didn't call Abraham so that his descendants could boast in being special because they had the law. No, God called Abraham in order to set in motion a plan to save humanity and to set his whole creation to rights. God's intent wasn't to save the righteous, but to save ungodly sinners, because he is gracious. So faith in God's gracious promise is what opens covenant membership to all of Abraham's descendants. Paul goes on now to say who these people are:

**...not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham, for he is the father of us all, as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations"**

Abraham's family isn't just those who observe the law—and this doesn't mean that Paul is saying that observing the law actually does make you a member, this is just shorthand for referring to ethnic Jews. Abraham's family is made up of all those who share in his faith in the crazy and impossible promise of God to restore life to the world. Abraham is the father of all who believe, Jew and Gentile alike. And Paul reminds us again of God's promise to Abraham: "I have made you the father of many nations"—not just the Jews.

And now Paul adds:

**...in the presence of the God in whom he believed...**

This isn't the easiest passage to translate into English in a way that captures Paul's point. Remember that he began talking about Abraham by addressing the Jewish idea that Abraham was counted righteous on account of his faithfulness to the law and he quickly followed that up saying, "not before God". That "not before God" is sort of Paul's way of saying, "No way! Not at all! God forbid such an idea!" But now that he's explained and shown from Abraham's own story that membership in the family is by faith, he uses this phrase "in the presence of God" as a way of say that *this* is how it works. This is what God intended. It's by faith in him and in his promise.

And this lets Paul's argument flow seamlessly into a statement about the character of God. This is the "why" of it all. Why has God done this? Why does God desire not just to redeem Abraham and the Jews, but also the nations? Because he is the God...

**...who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.**

This is a very Jewish way to describe God and we don't have time to get into it in detail this morning, but it stresses God's role as the Creator and giver of life. God not only created and gave life in the beginning, but when humanity rejected his life, God set in motion a plan to restore that life to us. It began with Abraham. Again, Abraham was a godless pagan, but in him God called into being a new family that did not before exist. And in calling Abraham, God chose a man who was dead in the sense that he had no children, no heir, and no hope, but because of his faith, Abraham and his barren wife, Sarah, were restored to life. Humanity rejected God's life—again, exemplified by Paul in the sin of homosexuality, which is barren and life-rejecting—but in Abraham and

Sarah, God restored the human vocation of living before his face and bringing life into the world. Through this family all of the world would once again know the living God.

Now in verses 18-22 Paul recaps all of this.

**In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations; as he had been told, “So shall your descendants be.” He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead because he was about a hundred years old, or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was “reckoned to him as righteousness.”**

Again, God’s promise was an impossible one. That an old man with a barren wife could be the father of one son, let alone many nations was absurd, but Abraham trusted in the Lord. Even when he made the mistake of trying to bring God’s promise about in his own power with the help of Sarah’s maid, Abraham was doing so in faith that God’s promise would come to pass. It took him time and several lessons to understand that God could do it without his help, but Abraham’s faith never wavered. We see this powerfully when Abraham was prepared to sacrifice Isaac, the promised son. Abraham understood that no matter what might happen, God would be faithful to his promises. Like Job, he could say, “Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him. Abraham knew death. He was essentially dead himself and he saw death all around. But in God he had a promise of life. In that promise he had a glimpse of Creation and of humanity being set to rights and he put his faith in that promise.

Paul also reminds us here of another important point: Abraham didn’t merit or earn anything by his faith. His faith was his *response* to God’s grace.

Remember, it was God who came to Abraham with the offer of life. Life is God’s gift, just as it has been since the Creation. Faith was Abraham’s response to that gift. He took hold of it in belief. In doing that, Abraham did just what we do in our baptism. In the water God offers a promise of life. By passing through the water, we take hold of that promise by faith.

Justification—being counted as a member of God’s covenant family—is God’s response to all those in whom his life takes root by faith.

Now, Paul’s almost at the end of the first part of his letter to the Roman Christians, but there’s one more vitally important question he needs to answer: What about us? Where do *we* fit into this? So far he’s been arguing against a hypothetical opponent using this formal rhetorical style that was called a diatribe. But where do the Christians he’s writing to fit into this? And where do we, as Twenty-first Century Christians in Canada fit into this? Like Arthur Dent in *The Hitchhiker’s Guide*, a lot of us no know more of where we stand in the story, in the big picture than a tea leaf knows the history of the East India Company. But Paul’s now shown us the big picture by taking us back to Creation and God’s original plan and then, particularly, to Abraham. Paul’s shown how God’s promise to Abraham wasn’t just a promise to him. It wasn’t just a promise to the Jews. It was a promise to set all of Creation to rights. And Abraham isn’t just history. Abraham and God’s promises to him were the foundation on which the covenant was built. The Roman Christians and you and I, if we are in Christ, are part of that same covenant. We stand on that foundation with Abraham. His history is our history. His story is our story. Paul writes in verses 23-24a:

**But the words, “it was reckoned to him,” were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also.**

Now, a lot of Christians struggle with this. Yes, Abraham is a great example of faith, but what does God’s promise to him have to do with us. It doesn’t help that one of the most popular theological systems of the last century amongst Evangelicals draws a sharp division between Abraham and Gentile believers in Jesus and between Israel and the Church, dividing the people of God and making two of what Paul has spent so much time here stressing is *one*. I hope you’ve seen how Paul has made this connection between Abraham and us and between Israel and the Church, especially as we’ve looked at Chapter 4. God is working in and through us, his Church today, to set humanity and Creation to rights, because he called Abraham and worked through him to set humanity and Creation to rights. If we are Abraham’s sons and daughters, his calling and his mission are our calling and our mission. In verses 24 and 25 Paul connects the final dots for us.

**It will be reckoned to us who believe in him that raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification.**

Abraham was as good as dead, but he had faith in the God who promised him life. That promise pointed forward to something. Actually, it pointed forward to *someone*. It pointed forward to Jesus who was crucified and then raised by God from the dead. As we’ve seen before, when God resurrected Jesus from the grave he overturned the false verdict of Pilate and the Jewish authorities. They declared that he was not the Messiah, but the empty tomb declares that he, in fact, is Israel’s Messiah and if he is Israel’s Messiah, in accordance with God’s promise to Abraham, that means that Jesus is the *world’s* true Lord. The resurrection of Jesus fulfils God’s promise to Abraham. In it we

see the life of God bursting forth into the world—a life that Abraham experienced in a small way in the birth of Isaac, but a life that he could only look forward to, hoping against hope. In Jesus, God has set in motion the forces of life that are making all things new. In Jesus, God has restored those of us who are in him, those of us who, by faith, are part of his covenant family and gifted with the life of his Spirit. In Jesus, God has restored us to the vocation for which we were created: to live before his face, bearing his image in the world, serving him as our King.

Faith is often seen as some kind of nebulous trust in a vague and far away God. And we often make faith out to be a thing that seems to stand apart all by itself—almost as if the object of our faith doesn't really matter. Often we see it all as just sort of being vaguely religious. Brothers and Sisters, when we get the story right and find our place in it, we see that faith isn't just vague belief. Faith is trust in the God who raised Jesus from the dead and declared him to be Lord of all. And then we see that the God who raised Jesus from the dead isn't some far away God. He is the God who drew near to Abraham and called him into a covenant. He is the God who has come near in Jesus, becoming one of us and giving his own life on our behalf. As Paul writes, our trespasses—our sin, our idolatry, our rebellion against him—were the reason that Jesus was handed over to die. Paul looks back to Isaiah 40-55 here. That's where the prophet speaks of the suffering servant who would die vicariously for the sake of his people. Isaiah, in Chapter 53, declares the servant to be one who suffered to make many righteous—to incorporate *many* into God's covenant family.

The resurrection of Jesus reveals the righteousness—the faithfulness—of God. The resurrection declares that Jesus is, was, and always has been the plan of God to restore his Creation and to restore human beings to his life.

The world rejected him. The world denied his claims and killed him, but God vindicated him when he raised him from the dead. God declared Jesus to be in the right and in that we see that the life and death of Jesus were the true faithfulness for which God created a covenant people in the first place. They failed, but Jesus did not. And, Brothers and Sisters, because Jesus was by his resurrection declared to be the Messiah—to be faithful Israel—that means that all those who belong to him by faith are members of Abraham's family. Because of our faith in Jesus, we are—like him—declared also to be in the right.

Brothers and Sisters, this puts us on the map. It shows us the big picture. It shows us all of history and God's plan for his Creation and it says: "You are here." We were created to bear his image—to be his representative here on earth, expanding the garden until it encompassed the whole earth—maybe the whole cosmos. We rejected that vocation, but God has restored it to us in Jesus. We are a part of the people—sinners turned into saints, rebels turned into loyal subject of the King—called to live in faith, called to proclaim that Jesus is Lord of the whole earth, and called to make known the life, the love, the grace, the justice, the mercy of God until the whole earth is full of his glory as the waters cover the sea.

Come to the Lord's Table this morning in faith and be strengthened. Be reminded that our Lord has given his body and blood for us. In him we are forgiven, filled with the life of his Spirit, and our hearts and minds set are right so that we can once again bear the image of God for the sake of the world and tell the story of your redeeming love to all.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, we give you thanks for your grace. We rejected your life. We deserve only death. But you have sought us out and brought us back to your fellowship,

making it possible through the death of your own Son. As we ponder these things, as we immerse ourselves in your Word, as we receive the grace given through your Sacraments, give us a sense, we pray, of your love for us. Remind us of the story into which you have brought us. And equip us to proclaim your love, your grace, and the death and resurrection of Jesus to everyone around us. We ask this through him. Amen.