

## Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost – Year C

**RCL Readings** – Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Psalm 50:1-8, 22-23; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40

**ACNA Readings** – Genesis 15:1-6; Psalm 33(1-9) 10-21; Hebrews 11:1-16; Luke 12:32-40

**Introduction.** Faith in Greek is πίστις (*pistis*), which is a feminine noun. However, in Hebrew faith is אמונה (*emunah*) which is a verb. Actually, it's a gerund, which are words formed from verbs that can have both properties of verbs and nouns. In English, we see them as words ending in -ing. Walking, looking, and seeing are gerunds. Someone who is walking is acting out the verb "to walk". The biblical understanding of faith is therefore more than something believed; it is something acted out and put into practice.

**Common Theme.** Our readings this week bring to attention what a true and living faith is. We will learn the call of true religion in the Prophets, be encouraged by the heroes of faith who walked out their faith in obedience and be challenged by Jesus to be vigilant in our faith today.

**Isaiah 1:1, 10-20.** There are seven people in the Bible with the name Isaiah. The name means God is Salvation and remains quite popular in both Jewish and Christian communities to this day. According to tradition, the prophet Isaiah was a cousin of King Uzziah (11th king of Judah) and his prophetic career occurred during a time of material prosperity but superficial religiosity. In the first verses of Isaiah, God calls heaven and earth as witnesses that Judah is in a state of spiritual rebellion. To get the people's attention, the Lord calls his people Sodom and Gomorrah, which the people would know from their sacred history are evil cities destroyed by God for their wickedness. What's at the stake is the moral character of the Jewish people, not the number of their religious festivals, of which there are many. The people of Judah participate in religious worship, follow the sacred calendar and attend regular prayer. But their hearts are not in line with their actions. The religious ideal of God is care and justice for the weakest members of society: the orphans and widows. Isaiah challenges the people – not to learn how to pray better, sing louder or have more festivals but – to "learn to do good", especially to the poor and disenfranchised. True faith is not found in a prayer; it's seen in an action. While the spiritual condition of Judah was poor, the prophetic voice declares hope that "though your sins are as scarlet, that shall be whiter than snow".

**Psalm 50:1-8, 22-23.** Asaph begins the psalm with the image of the Almighty summoning his creation. God will talk to Israel, but he will have the attention of all the peoples of the earth while he does so, which is very similar to the opening verses of Isaiah. A famous line from the movie Spiderman says: "With great power comes great responsibility". Israel is special to God. The psalm reminds us that God shines forth from Zion. With great privilege comes great responsibility, and now the Lord will enter into judgment with his people before the witnessing world. The psalmist describes how the sacrificial system is not the reason for the Lord's rebuke. Empty repetitious ritual is! Sacrifices are not bribes as God already owns the animals that we would bring as gifts. Worship must always be an engagement with the heart. Any worship, song, or prayer that does not engage with our hearts ends as empty ceremony. The

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sacrificial system was not an evil institution as it was God who had initially ordained it. The psalm itself was composed for temple worship and would have been sung in the temple where the sacrifices were taking place. The last two verses from Asaph declare that God is glorified through a truly thankful heart and a right walk with the Lord. This does not mean that the worshipper will never offer any sacrifices at all, but that a living relationship with God always starts from an obedient heart.

**Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16.** The writer of Hebrews presents a list of biblical characters whose stories emphasize their faithful perseverance as a reflection of true faith. An honest criticism of the Church is that we have too many practical atheists, people with a theoretical belief in God that has no impact on their daily lives or walk with the Lord. One of our tasks is to encourage each other to have more than just the ability to believe but to put that belief into action. Faith, particularly from the Jewish point of view, meant faithfulness and trust that is active and lived out rather than a matter of mere belief. Thus Hebrews writes, “by faith Abraham ... obeyed and went.” and “all these people were living by faith when they died”. Faith is not only a noun, but it’s also an active verb.

**Luke 12:32-40.** In Acts 20:35, Paul quotes Jesus as saying, “It is more blessed to give than to receive”. The Gospels don’t record Jesus actually saying that so Paul probably heard it through an oral tradition. The sentiment though is very similar to the teaching of Jesus we have here in this Gospel passage. Jesus is encouraging us to lead relatively simple lives and to have a non-attachment to wealth and possessions. This message is incredibly counter-cultural in today’s world. At the time of Jesus, some other Jewish people thought similarly, such as the Dead Sea community where they sold everything and were quite critical of wealth. Jesus however is not against wealth per se, as wealth can be a blessing from the Lord. Jesus is critical of the attachment we might have to material treasure that distracts us from following the heart of God. In contrast to the world’s preoccupation with gaining material items, the life of a disciple of Jesus should be characterized by generosity, especially towards the poor. Jesus urges us to be vigilant in our faith, not distracted by greed or anxiety for the future. In summary, Jesus tells a story in which we are described as servants and need to be ready to serve the Master who may return at any time. Faith is something active, something that does not wane over time and engages in acts of generosity.

### ACNA Readings

**Genesis 15:1–6.** After Abram’s victory over the confederation of kings in Genesis 14 and the restoration of his nephew Lot and his family and all his possessions, Abram was blessed by Melchizedec, King of Salem, priest of the Most High God, affirming that the dramatic deliverance was because of the blessing of the Most High God and not because of Abram’s power. After this, God’s word comes to him afresh. The reading divides into two: verses 1–6 about God’s promise of a son and heir for Abram, and verses 7–21 about God’s covenantal pledge of future redemption for the nation and a promise of a land. Abram raises questions of doubt in each section, and God affirms the promises fulsomely!

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Verse 1, “The word of the Lord comes to Abram in a vision,” just like the prophets later, as Abram too was a prophet in his generation (Gen 20:7). The Lord backs up Melchizedec’s message with a promise—Abram does not need to fear attacks from any number of aggressors, as the Lord is his shield and reward! The word for *shield* here is from the verb used by Melchizedec (14:20) when he praised the Most High God who *delivered* Abram’s enemies into his hand. And the pronoun is emphatic: “*I* (am) a shield for you.” Some then translate the next phrase as “your reward will be very great” (e.g., NASB, NRSV), taking the statement as an independent clause, but the evidence from elsewhere<sup>1</sup> suggests “great abundance” or “very great” is modifying the noun “your reward,” in apposition to “a shield for you.” So the Lord is saying: “*I* am a shield for you and your reward in great abundance.” What a stunning promise against fear—God our shield and our very great reward!

Verse 2. Up to this point in Genesis, Abram has only been silent in response to the Lord’s speeches, so this is the first record of him actually responding. Robert Alter says it “reveals a hitherto un-glimpsed human dimension of Abram.”<sup>2</sup> Abram starts: “O, Sovereign Lord”, which is an English translation of the Hebrew, “Adonai YHWH.” The tetragrammaton (YHWH) is usually written in the Tanakh with the vowels like Adonai (to avoid readers pronouncing the divine name), but in this verse (and v. 8), it would lead to a repetition of Adonai, so here the tetragrammaton is pointed instead with the vowels for the word Elohim (God), which produces the reading “Master, God,” in the Jewish textual tradition. Also, Abram’s response continues with an emphatic personal pronoun, parallel with the Lord’s: “since *I* (am) going childless.” The participle for going/walking here could suggest Abram’s personal anguish about continuing to walk around in life childless. The Lord is promising *I* am your shield and abundant reward, but Abram says in fact *I* am walking about childless! Or the context suggests “going” could be a euphemism for “going to my end,” so meaning: “I am dying without any children.” The childlessness reminds us of the opening part of Abram’s story, regarding Sarai’s infertility (11:30).

The next sentence appears to have an intentional word-play in the Hebrew, literally: “The son of the acquisition (*ben-mesheq*) of my house is Eliezer of Damascus (*dam-meseq*).” The sound-play is in keeping with the belief that “the omen is in the nomen.” Damascus may mean “a well-watered land,” so Abram seems to be saying: I continue to go around childless and so Eliezer my steward will fulfil his name and become a well-watered land, as the inheritor of all my wealth! Verse 3 drives it home boldly with more alliteration in the original: literally, “Look, to me you have not given seed, and look, a son of my house is inheriting me.” The argument is “since ... then.” But the narrator in verse 4 mirrors Abram’s “Look,” with the word of the Lord coming to him in direct response. “Look, the Lord said: ‘This one will not inherit you.’” Notice, the Lord does not use the steward’s name, as he refuses to give the name any authority or significance as a well-watered land! Instead, the Lord says, “the one who comes out from your body (literally, belly/womb), *he* (emphatic) will inherit you,” emphasizing for the first time Abram’s biological propagation. Abram had sceptically argued that the Lord had given him no

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<sup>1</sup> NET Bible, Genesis 15, note 2.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, (London: W.W. Norton, 2019).

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seed, but the Lord shows him the stars of heaven and says “so shall be your seed.” In 13:16 the offspring is compared to the “dust of the earth,” but here to the “stars of the heaven,” with a grand visual display of the heavenly hosts! In 22:17 and 32, the seed is also likened to “the sand on the seashore.” Do these metaphors suggest an earthly and a heavenly seed coming from Abram?

Verse 6 in the Hebrew does not follow in a sequence but stops the reader short, to consider Abram's response to God's promise. Abram trusted the Lord. The verb used here (from which we get “amen” = it is true, sure) and the form of the verb<sup>3</sup> means “to consider something reliable or dependable.” Abram regarded the Lord who made this promise as reliable and fully capable of making it a reality.

And because of this, the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness. Firstly, what is the pronoun “it” (feminine in Hebrew) referring to here? There are two possibilities: firstly, it could be referring *back* to Abram's act of faith—Abram trusted the Lord and the Lord reckoned it, *his act of faith*, as righteousness. Secondly, it could be referring *forward* to the feminine noun “righteousness,” so meaning “and the Lord reckoned it to him, [namely] righteousness.”<sup>4</sup> The use of “reckoned” and “righteousness” only occur together here and in Psalm 106:31. It says there that Phinehas' actions in Numbers 25 were credited to him for righteousness. In that context, the use of “for” before righteousness makes the meaning explicit, but here in this context it is omitted, so here the LORD “reckoned it to him, righteousness.” In both contexts the word “righteousness” (*zedakah*) seems to carry the meaning of “loyal, rewardable behaviour,” and in comparable inscriptions, related words mean “correct, justifiable conduct.”<sup>5</sup> An ancient Jewish *midrash* (commentary) on this verse says: “And thus do you find that our father Abraham inherited this world and the world to come only in the merit of his believing in the L-rd. As it is written (in this connection, Gen 15:6), ‘And he believed in the L-rd, and it was accounted unto him as *zedakah*.’”<sup>6</sup> So faith here and in the Tanakh generally means “trusting profoundly in a person ... the personal God who has reiterated his promise.”<sup>7</sup>

**Psalm 33.** This is a psalm of praise for God's faithful care and for the joy of trusting in God. The Creator of the world also maintains it, and, in contrast to him, all human power pales in significance. The psalm is incorporated into the morning service of Sabbath and the festivals (JSB).

### Stanza 1<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> NET Bible. Genesis 15, note 20

<sup>4</sup> NET Bible. Genesis 15, note 22.

<sup>5</sup> NET Bible. Genesis 15, note 23.

<sup>6</sup> *Mek. of Rabbi Ishmael, beshallah* 7

<sup>7</sup> Berlin, Adele, Brettler, Marc Z., & Fishbane, Michael A. (Eds.). (2004). *The Jewish Study Bible: Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation*. (Oxford University Press), 35.

<sup>8</sup> Following the Stanza structure (and Strophe sub-structure) according to Fokkelman (reference above). I have shown the Strophes, even if there is no comment.

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**vv. 1–3:** A call to praise. This psalm presents as a hymn, with a collective and choral setting, so the thanksgiving is not individual, but national and global. The first three verses suggest public performance with orchestra and chorus. Verse 3b calls the orchestra to play the music well, that is, skillfully.

**vv. 4–5:** After the call to praise, the psalmist now gives a series of reasons why the Lord is worthy of praise. Literally, verse 5 describes YHWH as: “loving righteousness and justice”—what an amazing expression of his nature! The verses argue that the world was created on the principles of righteousness, justice and *hesed*! What a contrast to so many modern arguments! Verses 4, 6: his *work* and his *word* made the heavens, referring back to Genesis 1:1 and Day 2 (Gen 1:6–8) and the *host* of the stars on Day 4 (Gen 1:14–19; and 2:1)

**vv. 6–7:** “[He] gathers like a pile the waters of the sea.” Some prefer to emend **נַד** (*ned*, “heap, pile”; cf. NASB) to **נַד** (*nod*, “bottle”; cf. NRSV; NIV “into jars”), but “pile” is used elsewhere to describe water that the LORD confines to one place (Exod 15:8; Josh 3:13, 16; Ps 78:13). This verse appears to refer to Genesis 1:9, where God decrees that the watery deep be gathered to one place so that dry land might appear. If so, the participles in this and the following line depict this action with special vividness, as if the readers were present on the occasion. Another option is that the participles picture the confinement of the sea to one place as an ongoing divine activity (NET, note 11). The word in 7b for oceans is the same word as in Gen 1:2b “the deep” or abyss (*tehōm*). Verse 7 is a double pun, picking up day 3 of creation and also Exodus 15.8 in the exodus, that the reed sea “streams stood up as a *mound*.” The phrase “the breath of his mouth,” is a parallel to “the word of the Lord,” but also picks up the use of “breath” (*ruach*) in Genesis 1:2 and in 1:27.

### Stanza 2

**vv. 8–9:** No comment.

**vv. 10–12:** Verse 12 literally: “O the blessednesses/happinesses of the nation whose God is YHWH; the people he chose for an inheritance for him.” What an amazing expression! It states Israel’s special relationship as a nation with YHWH. The blessedness it refers to comes from God-given security and prosperity (NET, note 19). Verses 10–11: The Lord thwarts the counsel of nations, but his counsel stands forever.

**vv. 13–15:** Verse 15, literally, “the one forming together their heart.” Heart refers to human nature, but “together” is not so clear, maybe meaning the Lord forms every human person. The whole verse says he forms every heart, and he knows all their actions! These verses are not national, as above, but globalist and universal (Alter).

### Stanza 3

**vv. 16–17:** Humans amass vast armies and warriors built up great strength. How this contrasts with the Lord in the previous verses, who brought about creation and salvation by the word of his mouth! Verse

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17 literally says, “a lie [is] the horse for victory/salvation.” Even in the greatness of its strength, the horse will not be able to deliver! Trusting in human weapons for salvation will always disappoint!

**vv. 18–19:** Notice the broad terms here, “those who fear him” and “those who wait for him.”

**vv. 20–22:** Literally, “our nephesh,” meaning soul, life-breath, our very selves (Alter). YHWH is described as “our help and our shield.” The word for “help” (*ēzer*) is the same as used of the woman for the man in Eden (Gen 2:18).

### Bibliography

- **JSB:** Berlin, Adele, Brettler, Marc Z., & Fishbane, Michael A. (Eds.). (2004). *The Jewish Study Bible: Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation*. Oxford University Press.
- **Alter:** *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (3 vols): Robert Alter
- **NET:** *The NET Bible: Translation and Notes*

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**About the ACNA author.** Dr Paul Hocking has had a varied career in education, leadership and management development, planting and pastoring of a social-enterprise church, supporting the leadership of many churches and Christian charities under the auspices of Evangelical Alliance Wales, and directing the Cymru Institute for Contemporary Christianity (2010-2019). He has qualifications in Microbiology, Public Health and Action Research, and a PhD on the Hebrew Bible focusing on the composition of the book of Leviticus. He has publications in health services management and the Hebrew Bible, including two papers for CMJ on the Decalogue and Leviticus. Paul is married with two adult children.