Introduction

Abraham is the ideal of faith in God. All through the Old Testament he is held up as the epitome of the person who faithfully follows God.

God called him and he left his home and homeland to go where God told him to go. He uprooted his family and left behind a very prosperous, successful life and headed off into a new and strange land because God told him this was what he should do. During that time he faced lots of troubles and had to move again. But God led him and supported him along his way.

We don't know what's going on in Abraham's mind, but he does what God asks him to do. He follows where God leads.

In the passage we read just now, God speaks to Abraham saying, "Don't be afraid, I am your shield. You will be rewarded for your faithfulness."

Abraham answers in what must be a weary voice, "What reward can you give me? I am an old man and I don't have an heir. No one will carry on my name. I don't have a future."

In Old Testament times having a son to carry on your name was extremely important; much more than it is today. A person's name was far more important and the ability to have offspring who will continue your name was of the upmost importance. For Abraham not to be able to have a child was humiliating.

It's difficult for us to comprehend how important this was to Old Testament people, but it is hard to overstate the importance it held for them.

Abraham probably feels that he has done what God wanted, and he has received many blessings, but he still has no heir. Maybe he feels like he has gotten everything, but he has nothing.

God says to old Abraham, "You will not be childless. You will have an heir." Then he helps Abraham visualize what he is promising him. He says, "Step outside here, and look up into the night sky. Now start counting the stars. When you're done you'll have an idea of how many heirs I will give you."

And Genesis says, "Abraham believed the Lord, and the Lord reckoned it as righteousness."

We aren't completely certain what it was that Abraham believed because two sentences later Abraham asks God how he is going to know that this promise is true. Maybe Abraham looked down at his gnarled fingers or felt the stab of pain in his sciatica or tried to remember the last time he had made love to Sarah.

Are you really going to give me an heir, Lord?

Abraham has all this faith, he's done all this following, but he has questions, and doubts.
I

Can a person who has questions and doubts be a faithful disciple? Can you and I follow our Lord and still have questions? Can believers also have doubts?

We say "doubt" and we think of "Doubting Thomas." Thomas wasn't at all reserved about his doubts. Ten of the disciples come running to him to tell him that they have seen the risen Christ. He has appeared to them! Jesus really was raised from the dead and they have seen him themselves!

Does Thomas say, "Wow! That's great news. Tell me all about it?"

No. He doesn't believe them. He doesn't trust the close friends he has spent every day with for the past three years. In fact he says, "I won't believe unless I reach out and touch the wound in his side and the holes in the palms of his hands." Thomas is a belligerent doubter.

Did Jesus say, "If he doesn't believe, I'll condemn him. He doesn't have enough faith?"

No, Jesus doesn't say anything like that. Instead Jesus comes again to the disciples. In one of the most tender and compassionate scenes in the Bible, Jesus goes to Thomas and says, "Here, touch my side. Feel the wounds in my hands." As far as we know Thomas never touches Jesus at all. He doesn't need to.

Is doubt a failure of faith? It wouldn't seem to be. Abraham, the father of all the faithful, had doubts. Thomas, one of the twelve apostles, had very serious doubts.

I love the statement by Frederick Buechner: "Doubt is the ants in the pants of faith; it keeps it alive and moving." Faith is never complacent when doubt is present. Your faith is probably not sedentary when you are struggling with questions.

We may need some doubt along the way in order to work out what we really believe. I think of doubt not as the opposite of faith, but as an element of faith. Serious doubt can lead to a deeper and more thoughtful faith.

II

Many people think that a truly faithful person accepts beliefs without any questions. For example we might look at the person who says, "This is what my church says, so that's what I believe," and hold them up as the epitome of strong faith.

Maybe some people can do that but I wonder if they are really grasping what it is they believe. Are they thinking through what these beliefs mean? Have they considered the consequences of following this faith?

Jesus's parable of building the tower, that we read this morning, speaks about being aware of the cost of discipleship before you invest your life in it. Consider seriously what I am asking of you, Jesus says, before you decide to follow me. To do that requires asking some important questions.

The parable of the king going to war encourages us to weigh how prepared we are to truly follow Jesus. It asks, "Are you willing to take on what will be necessary?" If we don't have questions about that - and doubts - are we taking Jesus seriously enough?
You may have seen this bumper sticker: "The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it." I can't look at that bumper sticker without asking, "Have you read what the Bible says? Do you really know what you're saying?"

I wonder if they know the passage we read this morning, "Whoever doesn't hate his mother and father, wife and children, brother and sister...cannot be my disciple." The Bible says that.

Or have they read Jesus's words, "Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me?" It's in the Bible. I see that bumper sticker on the back of a Cadillac Escalade and wonder if the owner has read Jesus's words to the rich young man, "Go and give all that you have to the poor, and come follow me."

I think you should only put that bumper sticker on your car saying "The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it" after you have done some difficult soul searching, struggling with doubts, and asking foundational questions about your life and faith? If we take this faith seriously then we can't be glib about it. An unquestioning faith can be a naive faith.

Jesus makes it clear that he wants us to grapple with what he says rather than offering up blind assent. Jesus asks us to weigh the difficult as well as the comforting words that he speaks. If we are thoughtful about our faith it will certainly mean asking questions and raising doubts about whether we are up to the challenges Jesus sets before us.

III

Struggling with questions means we take seriously what Jesus is asking of us. When we have doubts our faith is active, not passive. It means faith is something we are involved in, not something that just happens to us.

Look back to Job. He faces horrible situations. He not only questions God, he's angry. Read Job. He yells at God, demands answers, and throws in God's face all the terrible pain he's had to deal with.

Does God say, "Listen you little snot, I'm God and I can crush you like a bug!?" No. God answers Job's questions; he acknowledges Job's pain. God not only allows Job's questions and doubts, God verifies the truth of what he says. God doesn't condemn or punish Job for his questions.

Read through the Psalms. They regularly complain to God, question the actions of God, and ask "Why?"

Look at Jesus life. He had the most trouble with the people who were positive that their faith was absolutely true, like the Pharisees. They had no doubt that what they believed and what they were doing was right.

On the other hand Jesus is open, accepting, and compassionate to the woman at the well whose life is a bundle of questions. She has doubts about her faith, and doubts about herself and her worth.

So often the people with questions respond well to Jesus while those who know they have all the right answers are antagonistic. The people who have no doubt about their religious beliefs are
often the ones who are out to trick or trap Jesus. The New Testament shows us that they are the ones involved with having Jesus arrested and killed.

We certainly don't want to live a life of nothing but doubts and questions, but some healthy questions show that we are taking our faith seriously and that we are deeply involved in it.

Conclusion

The season of Lent is traditionally a time when we take a careful look at our faith. We evaluate what we believe and especially how well we are living the faith we hold.

I believe the Bible demonstrates to us that doubts are not failures of faith, but can be healthy parts of a growing faith. They are the "ants in the pants" that keep us from having a complacent and too comfortable faith.

God tells Abraham that he is going to have more heirs than there are stars in the sky. Abraham believed and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness. And then immediately Abraham turns to God and says, "This old body is going to produce an heir? How's that going to happen?"

Abraham had a strong relationship with God. Part of their relationship was the questions and doubts that Abraham had as his faith developed. Abraham can be a demonstration that when we honestly struggle with our questions and doubts they can help us grow a stronger, more thoughtful and mature faith.

We are all going to have questions and doubts. We can take them to our Lord who can use them to help strengthen our faith.

Amen.