THE FAITH OF ABRAHAM

In the year 1870 the Methodists were having their annual conference in Indiana. At one point, the president of the college where they were meeting said, "I think we live in a very exciting age." The presiding bishop said, "What do you mean?" The college president said, "I believe we are coming into a time of great inventions. I believe, for example, that men will fly through the air like birds." The Bishop said, "This is heresy! The Bible says that flight is reserved for the angels. We will have no such talk here." After the conference, the president, whose name was Milton Wright, went home to his two small sons, Wilbur and Orville. And you know what they did to their father's vision. The first Wright Biplane took to the air and made the first powered flight on December 17, 1903, near Kitty Hawk.

Vision is the ability to see beyond the here and now to what the future will hold. Too often in life we lack vision. Consider these famous predictions that underestimated the incredible power of vision:

In 1876 Western Union sent out a memo saying "The Telephone has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication." In 1899 Charles Duell the commissioner of the U.S. Office of Patents said, "Everything that can be invented has been invented." In 1943, the chairman of IBM Thomas Watson said, "I think there is a market for maybe five computers in the world." Some 34 years later in 1977 the president and founder of Digital Equipment Corporation Ken Olson said, "There is no reason why anyone would want a computer in their home." In 1962 the Decca Recording company, turned down signing the Beatles: "We don’t like their sound and guitar music is on the way out."

These are all examples of limited vision in terms of what was happening in the world around us. Limited vision can also happen in the church. Too often we miss the opportunity to impact the world in which we live because we fail to have the vision to see what God is doing around us. The result is that we lack any sense of clear direction and mission. Today I want us to talk about faith so let’s turn to the ‘faith chapter’ of the bible:

Heb 11: 8 By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. 9 By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God 11 By faith Abraham, even though he was past age--and Sarah herself was barren--was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. 12 And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore. 13 All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. 14 People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. 15 If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 Instead, they were longing for a better country--a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. 17 By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, 18 even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." 19 Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.

This scripture tells us 3 things about the faith of Abraham:
1. He Saw the Invisible – vs. 8-14

By faith Abraham went where he was told to go. Even though it did not make any sense to him, he was obedient to God and went. He left his comfortable home and traveled through Caanan where he lived in a tent – a temporary structure. He did this because he was looked forward to a "city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God".

Abraham did not live to see the fulfillment of that promise. Still, he believed God and went. The promises of God he "saw them and welcomed them from a distance". That is vision.

Webster's defines VISION as 1. The faculty of sight, 2. Unusual foresight, 3. A mental image produced by the imagination, 4. The experience of the supernatural as if with the eyes. Vision is a mental picture of a desired future. It is a picture that can be seen of what is not yet, but of what can be. It is seeing God's heart for your future.

Vision . . . is a clear mental image of a preferable future, imparted by God to His chosen servants and is based upon an accurate understanding of God, self, and circumstance. - George Barna

How is your vision this morning? I don't mean your physical vision but your spiritual vision. What is your vision concerning your own life and ministry? Where has God said he is leading you? Today we have our annual congregational meeting. What is your vision for this church? Where is Lord taking us and what image or picture do you see of this church in the future?

Abraham was willing to leave his home and live in a tent for the rest of his life because he saw the invisible. He understood what God was going to do. He endured the temporary to bring about the permanent. He saw from a distance what God was going to do and followed that vision.

A 5th grade Sunday School class was asked to go home and count the stars in the sky as part of their next lesson. They came back with various numbers. Some said 100, some said 1000, some said a million. Finally the teacher asked one boy, "How many stars did you count?" He replied, "3". The teacher asked how did you only see 3? He said, "I guess we just have a small backyard.

We as a church have a big back yard. Let me encourage you in the coming year to continue to "attempt great things for God and expect great things from God" -- William Carey

2. He Chose the Imperishable – vs. 15-16

If Abraham's focus had been comfort he never would have left Ur. But Abraham's focus was not on what he had lost (looking back) - he was focused on what had been promised to him (looking forward). He was "longing for a better country -- a heavenly one". He understood that what he was giving up was nothing compared to what he would receive. Every day we have before us this same choice. We can choose the natural or the spiritual. We can choose the perishable or the imperishable – building God's kingdom or building our own.

Phil 3:7 But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. 8 What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ
This is true for us individually but also true for us corporately as the church. In addressing unity in the church in Corinth Paul wrote to them saying:

1 Cor 3:11 For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12 If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, 13 his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work.

Paul says here that you yourselves (plural) are God's temple (singular) meaning the church. Each one of us chooses what part they will play in building the church. We chose the materials we will contribute to the structure.

To choose the imperishable means that you are willing to sacrifice in the short term to reap a harvest in the long term. This can mean you sacrifice financially or that you sacrifice your own tradition or comfort. As individuals and as a church you will face these decisions in the coming year. Will you endure the discomfort of change in order to get to the place of blessing which is always at the centre of God's will and vision.

3. He Attempted the Impossible – vs. 17-19

Abraham believed that God could do anything. He reasoned that God could raise the dead so he was willing to attempt the impossible because he knew that God could do the impossible.

Gen 22:1 Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. 2 Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about." 3 Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. 4 On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. 5 He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you."

John Maxwell says that, "Vision is...the ability to see...the faith to believe...and the courage to do." Seeing and believing are fine but at some point the rubber has to meet the road and you have to step out in faith.

About 350 years ago a shipload of travelers landed on the northeast coast of America. The first year they established a town site. The next year they elected a town government. The third year the town government planned to build a road five miles westward into the wilderness. In the fourth year the people tried to impeach their town government because they thought it was a waste of public funds to build a road five miles westward into a wilderness. Who needed to go there anyway? Here were people who had the vision to see three thousand miles across an ocean and overcome great hardships to get there. But in just a few years they were not able to see even five miles out of town. They had lost their pioneering vision. With a clear vision of what we can become in Christ, no ocean of difficulty is too great. Without it, we rarely move beyond our current boundaries. -- Lynn Anderson.

Let me encourage us in the coming year to attempt the impossible. Pray that God will so challenge us as a church that failure is not only possible but probable unless God shows up in power.