

## A Multi-Generational Journey

Romans 4:1-5; Genesis 12:1-4

2nd Sunday of Lent

March 5, 2023 at The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa

- Introduction: The Japanese motel that has been in continuous operation since 703 AD, run by the same family for 53 generations.

Imagine that you are an employee at a local motel. It's not a bad job, but there is no sense of tradition or destiny to it. The motel is not family owned and it is not something to which you wish to dedicate your life, but would you feel differently if you were in this hotel in Japan?

- The oldest hotel in the world.

There is a hotel, built near a hot spring in Yamanashi Prefecture, Japan called the Nishiyama Onsen Keiunkan and it is family owned and run. It was founded by Fujiwara Mahito in 705 AD and is still owned by his descendants. That's 52 generations, making it the oldest hotel in the world. I struggle to imagine the sense of tradition and destiny that comes with being part of that family. This modern business has over fifty generations "looking over their shoulders", in a sense. The influence, and sacrifice and work of all those who came before would motivate us to do them proud by how we ran that business and served the people. No doubt the current leadership had the example and wisdom of the prior generations to help them in their endeavors and I'm sure they look at the family business and their ancestors with admiration and pride, and view their own lives as part of a larger tradition that will continue long after they have turned control over to the next generation. They don't, I would imagine, look at their lives as discrete, separate events, but rather part of a larger stream of humanity dedicated to a larger purpose. There is something Biblical about that.

- We are not islands

We all are part of the great Christian family and, no doubt, influenced by people who have come before us and we in turn are influencing a generation (or more than one) coming after us. Our lives are not discrete or isolated like islands. In our passage for today we find that we are the beneficiaries of Abraham, who lived many centuries before us and we should look at our lives in terms of the people who helped us, and those we are helping along the way. Following Christ is a multi-generational journey.

- Faith is obedience

Centuries and centuries ago, Abraham was told by God to collect his family and his valuables and leave his homeland and travel to a country that would be revealed to him enrooted. Abraham and his family obeyed and during that long journey he asked God about having a sons. God had promised that he and Sarah would have descendants that would create a great nation. Years passed, and Abraham and his entourage still lived as immigrants. One night God showed Abraham that stars in the sky and told him that his descendants would be more numerous than even these. Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him as righteousness. That verse (Genesis 15:6) is quoted three times in the New Testament; in Galatians 3:6, here in Romans and in James 2:23, where we are reminded that faith requires action. It is attitude with obedience, not just attitude alone. Abraham greeted his descendants from afar and was content to live his days as an immigrant, knowing that the significance of his obedience would extend beyond the parameters of his days on earth. The Apostle Paul wrote that those descendants included not just literal

descendants of Abraham but all those who believed in the Messiah as Abraham did, which includes us. We are among those stars in the sky, and so are people we haven't met yet but will and will influence to follow our Lord and Abraham's. You may be called to do things that will not bless you, but will bless those who follow you. Abram's faith required him to leave his home forever and live his days as a foreigner in a strange land.

- Application: Alice Groff

Can we think of the value of our lives and what we have done with them in the context of those who have gone before us? Or to think of our influence on the next generations?

One person who came before me, in a sense, was a lady named Alice Groff. Alice and her husband, Ernie were very active in the church during my childhood and teen years. Alice was involved in everything and Ernie actually worked full-time as a janitor and handyman for the church. Alice was the most positive, encouraging person that I've ever met. She had a word of encouragement every time she met me when I decided to study for the ministry, right up until I left for college. By the time I was ordained, she had passed away but I thanked her when I gave my first sermon here as a seminary graduate and I thank her today. Some people talk about standing on the shoulders of giants, but we stand on the shoulders of saints.

- The example of Mordicai Ham

Perhaps someday someone will say that about us, that we influenced and encouraged them in their walk with Christ. I hope so, and I am certain that we do influence people all the time, whether for good or bad, so be proactive about being a Christian influence for good. You never know the impact you might have. I read of a man raised in a Christian farming family in Kentucky by the name of Mordecai Ham. He was part of a line of farmers who also traveled to churches preaching on Sundays. While he had a somewhat successful ministry, he is not that well known today. The most notable thing about his work was the impact his preaching had on one lanky, strong-willed boy named Billy Graham. The faithful Christian influences people and we often do not know this side of eternity the effect that influence shall have. Be mindful of that when you consider your life.

- Conclusion

In our individualistic culture, we often look at our lives as something discrete and to ourselves, like an island. Perhaps we would do well to reconsider, for our lives are part of a large gathering of people from all over the world in many different generations, including people who had an influence on his, and we in turn will have an influence on others during the course of our days. Consider your life this week, and prayerfully think of those who have influenced you, and on whom you may be an influence yourself.