As religious paleontologists this morning, we are going to do a little digging into Scripture. Paul wrote to the Romans, a community he never visited, giving them a clear and compelling definition of the gospel. For Paul, the gospel “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith…For in [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith’” (1:16-17). At the heart of Paul’s understanding of the gospel is faith, nothing more and nothing less. In fact, Paul uses the word four times in these two verses.

But Paul was not the first in his evolutionary tree to focus on faith. He quotes the prophet Habakkuk when he speaks of the saving power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. A learned man trained in the Jew tradition Paul knew this line from Habakkuk: “Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith” (2:4). Just as Paleontologists seek to make connections between species, here Paul makes a connection with his spiritual ancestor Habakkuk, the prophet who understood that our spirits are not right until we live by faith.

Then, in the fourth chapter of his letter to the Romans, Paul digs deeper into the power of faith using the example of Abraham, the one who “believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness” (4:3). Paul knew that for thousands of years, the term “righteousness” applied to those who strictly obeyed a moral code based in the law of God, as in “the righteous hate falsehood” (Proverbs 13:5), “the thoughts of the righteous are just” (Proverbs 12:5), and “the desire of the righteous ends only in good” (Proverbs 11:23).

But Paul came to see that “there is no one who is righteous, not even one” (Romans 3:10). Looking inward, Paul confessed, “I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (Romans 7:18-19). Following the law to avoid sin made Paul crazy. He needed a new way to be reckoned as righteous. In place of good works and perfect adherence to the law, he needed a fresh approach to becoming right with God.

Fortunately, he found that way in the faith of Abraham. For Paul, this was the missing link in his spiritual evolution. He asked the Romans, “What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God” (Romans 4:1-2). But instead of receiving credit for good works, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness” (4:3).

This idea was not new to Paul. There is a line in Genesis that says that Abraham “believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness” (15:6). The key was that Abraham believed the Lord. Abraham’s belief in God justified him, making him right with God. As Paul read the book of Genesis, he discovered that Abraham’s faith made him righteous, not his works. Abraham became right with God through faith. That is a game-changer!

Similarly, Abraham received God’s promises through “the righteousness of faith.” Previously, everyone assumed that promises came “through the law” (Romans 4:13). But now, God’s promises for a new and better future are available to everyone who believes. One need only trust the God, “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (4:17). This is good news for all of us, because it means that righteousness is gained by all who “share the faith of Abraham” (4:16), even if we cannot follow God’s law to the letter.

For Christians, sharing the faith of Abraham includes having faith in Jesus Christ. This was as true for the apostle Paul as it is for all his descendants in the Christian Church. The reformer Martin Luther, like Paul, struggled with his sinfulness. He wanted to be a good and righteous person, so he confessed his sins frequently, often daily, and for as long as six hours at a time. But after confessing his sins, he would leave the church and remember other sins that he needed to confess. This frustrated him, and he realized that he could not become righteous by human effort alone.

Then, Luther read Paul’s letter to the Romans where it says, “the one who is righteous will live by faith” (1:17). Luther realized that he could not be made righteous by his good efforts, but by his faith in Jesus Christ. “I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise,” said Luther. “This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven.”

The Protestant Reformation with Luther’s discovery about the role of faith in making us right with God. “If you have true faith that Christ is your Savior,” he said, “then at once you have a gracious God, [and] you should see pure grace and overflowing love.” This inspired Luther to preach the gospel, a word that means “good news,” because he saw that the gospel was the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.

Faith was a game-changer for Abraham, Paul, and Martin Luther. It was the missing link that made them right with God, and it can do the same for us. Faith is a willingness to trust God and Jesus, and to walk with them on the path of life. Abraham put this kind of trust in God, and he “did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead,” said Paul, “or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb” (Romans 4:19). Instead, Abraham trusted God to be the one “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Romans 4:17). Sure enough, God did what was promised, and made Abraham “the father of many nations” (Romans 4:17).

When we have this kind of faith, we are made right with God both now and eternally. There is nothing crazy about it. Faith is the biggest game-changer in Christian history, making us right with God through our faith in Jesus Christ. Faith means that we can trust God to work through us, even when our bodies fail us. It means we can trust Jesus to lead us, even when we wander through a thicket of difficult moral choices. It means we can trust the Holy Spirit to uplift us, even when we disappoint ourselves and others. Being righteous does not come from moral perfection; it is based on being made right with God through our faith in Jesus. We can thank Abraham the Adalatherium, a man of unusually rare and precious faith.

**Sources:**

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**Abraham and the Adalatherium**

Sunday, February 28, 2021 Romans 4:13-25

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

They call it “crazy beast.” This mammal roamed the Southern Hemisphere 66 million years ago, during the time of the dinosaurs. Its official name is “Adalatherium”: literally “crazy beast.” Adalatherium’s forelimbs sit close together, like kitten legs, and its hind legs are splayed like a bodybuilder’s squat. The animal had ever-growing front teeth and weird back teeth that look like they arrived from outer space. Its skull is unique, with a mysterious hole above its snout. This strange fusion of odd traits is why they named it “crazy beast.”

Found on the island of Madagascar, Adalatherium is special because it is rare. Paleontologists who studied the site found 20,000 dinosaurs, frogs, and crocodiles fossils, but only 12 “crazy beast” fossils. The fossil is a “game-changer,” according to paleontologist Patrick M. O’Connor, an important ancient ancestor which helps fill some gaps in the evolution of mammals.

In our text, Paul describes our ancient ancestor Abraham as a game-changer in the evolution of our faith. Abraham did not have kitten legs, weird back teeth, or a skull with a mysterious hole. Yet, Abraham was unique; he surprised everyone by focusing on faith instead of religious law. Paul says that God’s promise “did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith” (Romans 4:13). This unexpected focus on faith instead of rules set Abraham and his descendants apart in the ancient world.

Abraham was an Adalatherium. Look at Abraham and you see someone saved by his faith. His trust in God made him right with God, and Paul says that his faith “was reckoned to him as righteousness” (4:22). In a world of spiritual dinosaurs, Abraham filled an important gap in the evolution of the people of God, from ancient Hebrews to modern Christians. He showed evidence of a strong and saving faith.