

A Rocky Start

In the name of Jesus, the Son of the Living God, dear friends in Christ: If in its early stages a construction project is beset by problems and delays, or if the first time you meet someone you don't hit it off very well, argue a bit, believe you've been insulted somehow, and walk away with sour feelings toward that person, regardless of what happens later in either the project or the relationship, we say that things got off to a rocky start. A rocky start is by definition not a good one. It's a beginning that doesn't bode well for the future. It is possible that the situation may improve over time; but in most cases things that begin badly end that way too.

I mention this because we've got what could be considered rocky starts in two of today's Scripture readings. We'll start with the passage from Isaiah. There we read, "Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, you who seek the Lord; look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you". Well, there you go. If you're pursuing righteousness, if you're seeking the Lord, look at the rock that is father Abraham and Sarah his wife. What about them? Well, presumably their great virtue. They're models of righteousness. If you want to be righteous, if you want to build your life before the Lord on something solid, try to act like them. That's certainly how many have understood this passage.

Now let's skip over to the Gospel. Jesus asks his disciples what people are saying about him. There are lots of guesses; all of them wrong. Then Jesus says, "What about you guys? Who do you say that I am?" Peter answers for the group, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus responds, "Blessed are you Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." And there you have it: Jesus himself says that Peter is the rock upon which he's going to build his indestructible church. What about Peter? Well, presumably his authority, his headship over the other disciples bestowed upon him by Christ himself; that together with the graces that the Lord funnels exclusively through Peter and his successors to reach the rest of the world. Certainly that's how one major Christian church body understands it. I don't need to mention which one.

So, Abraham is the rock of righteousness whom we are to try to imitate in our behavior, and Peter is the rock upon which the church stands, the ultimate authority whom we are to obey. That's great. The trouble is that neither rock, Abraham's virtue or Peter's authority, is very stable. If they are your cornerstone, you're off to a rocky start. Take Abraham: when the Lord first calls him, he's an idol worshipping pagan. Hardly a model of virtue. But okay, we all start in unbelief. So we'll give him a pass on that. Anyway, the Lord makes all these grand promises to him: to bless him, to make his name great, to make of him a great nation, to give him a land of his own, and to bless all peoples on earth through his Seed – one Seed in particular: the Christ and promised Savior.

To his credit, Abraham believes the Lord and steps out in faith to go see the land promised to him. The trouble is that he doesn't stay there. Shortly after his arrival there's a famine in the land. And rather than trust the Lord to take care of him, he flees to Egypt. When he gets there he fears that someone will want to kill him in order to take his lovely wife Sarah from him. He tells her to say that she's his sister. She does. And the Pharaoh of Egypt takes her into his harem. Great. So now the woman through whom the Lord promised to give

Abraham many descendants is in another man's bedchamber. Good thinking, Abraham. It takes the Lord's intervention to rescue the couple from their stupidity and lack of faith.

Years later, when Sarah remains barren and passes beyond her potentially fertile years, the couple hatches their own plan to make the Lord's promise come true. We'll have Abraham father a child by Hagar, Sarah's servant girl. The plan works; but it's not the Lord's plan. Thirteen years pass. The whole time Abraham is patting himself on the back thinking that he has fulfilled the Lord's promise, and he's investing all his hope for the future in his son, Ishmael. Then the Lord shows up and says, "Now I'm going to give you the son I promised by Sarah, your wife." Instead of taking the Lord at his word, Abraham laughs so hard that can't remain standing. Shortly thereafter, Sarah overhears the Lord telling Abraham that within the year she will bear Abraham a son, and she too laughs at the Lord's word. When she's caught, she lies about it to the Lord.

And then to top it all off, shortly thereafter Abraham and Sarah go to Philistia. Having just heard from the Lord that Sarah is going to need to get pregnant and soon, Abraham, again fearing that someone will want to kill him in order to steal his wife away, orders her to say she's his sister. She does and this time she ends up in the harem of king Abimelech. Once again it's only by the Lord's intervention that the couple is saved from their stupidity and lack of faith. The whole point of this being Abraham and Sarah are hardly models of virtue for anyone to imitate. Imagine how messed up things would be if everyone acted like them.

Well what about Peter? Maybe he's a more stable foundation on which to build – except that he's not. Only a few weeks back in the Gospel reading, we heard Jesus chide Peter for his little faith. Just a few verses beyond today's text in which Jesus calls Peter blessed, the same Jesus calls Peter Satan. Yes Peter, who on the night of Jesus' arrest swore six ways from Sunday that he'd never leave Jesus and die with him if he could, and only a few hours later swore three times that he didn't even know Jesus. But more to the point in the matter of his supposed authority, recall that on several occasions Jesus caught the disciples arguing among themselves about which of them had preeminence in the kingdom of God. Jesus rebuked them. He told them that it's in the kingdoms of this earth that men seek to exercise authority over others; but things aren't that way in the kingdom of God. The greatest in the Lord's kingdom is the slave and servant of all, he told them. It's just this simple: the Lord Jesus did not appoint a single human head to be over his Church.

It looks like we got off to a rocky start. Let's see if we can turn things around. If Abraham himself is not the rock of righteousness to whom we are to look, maybe it's something about father Abraham. What could it be? Well, there is a passage that speaks about Abraham being righteous in the sight of the Lord. It shows up when Abraham is in a deep funk. He thinks the Lord has let him down. It's been many years since the Lord promised him a son and he and Sarah are still childless. Abraham thinks he'll have to adopt as his son his head servant in order to make the promise come true. The Lord tells him no. From your own body I will give you a son. And step outside. Look up and count the stars if you can. So shall your offspring be.

That's where we read it: Abraham believed the Lord, and he reckoned it to him as righteousness. Ah, so the rock of righteousness is not Abraham the man, it's the faith he had in the Lord's promise. It's the faith he later confessed by his actions when he became the father of the child of promise, his son Isaac. It's the faith he confessed by his actions when the Lord told him to take that child through whom all the promises were to be fulfilled and offer him up as a sacrifice. Abraham believed that even if his son died as a sin offering, the Lord would raise him up again and still through him fulfill all the promises he made to Abraham. In other words, Abraham believed the Gospel. Thus the Lord counted him righteous, just as he does for us

through faith in the Gospel – through faith in *the* Child of Promise who died as an offering for sin and rose again. That's our Rock of Righteousness.

Going back to Peter, if he himself is not the rock upon which Christ builds his Church, maybe it's something about Peter. What could that be? To find the answer we have only to look at the context in which Jesus speaks of the rock upon which he will build his Church. It begins with his question, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" Jesus is asking what people believe in their hearts and confess with their mouths about him. And to be fair, it appears that people have a favorable impression about him. I mean, I'd be flattered if someone thought I was John the Baptist or Elijah or one of the prophets. The trouble is that's not who Jesus is. The peoples' beliefs and confessions were wrong – all far short of the mark. But Peter's weren't. He hit it spot on. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." That's a rock solid faith and confession. That's the true confession upon which the Lord Jesus builds his Church.

We got off to a rocky start looking at Abraham and Peter the men. By themselves they turned out to be shifting sand, poor material for a foundation. But I think we've managed to correct that. And it turns out that for a construction project you actually want a rocky start, not in terms of problems and delays, but rather in terms of something solid upon which to build. That's what we've got in Peter's faith and confession. It tells us who Jesus is. That's what we've got in Abraham's faith and confession. It tells us what Jesus did to save us and how through faith in him we are counted righteous in God's sight. Who Jesus is and what he did to save us – these are the two Rocks upon which we stand in the Church. These are the two Rocks by which believing and confessing we are saved.

Now, take it a step further. We are in a church body that bears the title "Lutheran". A lot of people suppose it's because we follow a man named Martin Luther, the 16th century reformer. And many of them, our theological opponents in particular, love to point out Luther's manifest faults. Let's just say that he provided a lot of ammunition that could be used against him. After firing off a few such salvos, they'll ask us, "How can you follow a rotten sinner like that?" The answer is that we don't follow Luther the man. We adhere to the faith he confessed in Jesus – who he is, and what he did to save us. We are Lutherans because we stand upon the Christian faith as detailed and expressed in the Ecumenical Creeds and the Lutheran Confessions which are contained in the Book of Concord. Together they are our rock solid foundation of faith in Jesus, to whom alone be the glory. We are Lutheran because in the face of all threats, trials, and temptations we say with Luther regarding the Word of God, "Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen."

Soli Deo Gloria!