13For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. 14If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. 15For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

16For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, 17as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations") — the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. 18Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendants be." 19He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. 20No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, 21being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. 22Therefore his faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness." 23Now the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone, 24but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, 25who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

(Romans 4: 13-25)

"It depends on faith." If Paul's letter to the Romans needed a title, that would be as good as any. In the first half of this letter, Paul makes the same point in a variety of ways, and supporting that point with a variety of arguments, but the main gist is this: we accept God, and God accepts us, through faith. Are we justified by performing certain tasks or doing good deeds? No, Paul says, we are justified by grace, as a gift from God (3:24). Is it about following the Old Testament law perfectly? No, Paul says, because nobody can do that, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:23)… "we hold that a person is justified by faith," and it has nothing to do with deeds, or works, or legal obligation (3:28). apart from works prescribed by the law. What is the one thing that shapes our relationship with God more than anything else? Faith. It all depends on faith.

In the chapter we read this morning, Paul is supporting this point with the story of Abraham. In Romans, as well as in the Book of Hebrews, Father Abraham is lifted up as a shining example of what it means to have faith. At key points in his life, Abraham leaned on faith. We will look at that more closely, but before we do, it will help to define our terms.

What is faith, exactly? Is it something we believe? Is it something we feel? Is it something we do or enact? Instead of running to the dictionary, let's start with a different source. How about a Christmas movie? In the 1947 film *Miracle on 34th Street*, a specific definition of faith is offered at various times by at least three different characters. It may sound familiar to many of you: ***"Faith is believing in something when common sense tells you not to."***

When I did run to the dictionary, it seemed this definition holds some water. One dictionary defined faith as "strong belief… *based on spiritual apprehension rather than*

proof."[1] Merriam Webster said that faith "almost always implies certitude *even where there is no evidence or proof.*"[2] They all suggest that faith is something that cannot ultimately be proven with evidence or observation or logic, or even "common sense."

With that definition in mind, let's turn to the story of Abraham. One of the key ways Abraham depended on faith was in his decision to leave his hometown. Abraham lived with his wife Sarah in the city of Ur, which many believe was somewhere in modern day Iraq. Out of nowhere, God calls to him saying, *"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great."*[3] Now, we don't know, but my guess is that life was pretty good for Abraham and Sarah in Ur. They had family there, they knew where stuff was. It was a least a known commodity. Why in the world would they leave? Think about all the details you have to reset when you move to a new town – new barber, new dentist, setting up utilities, going to the DMV… awful. It's bad enough when you know where you're going, but Abraham hand no idea. No promises. No assurances. Common sense, we have to think, would say to stay put. Even so, Abraham decides to depend on faith, trust God, and leave his hometown for parts unknown.

Another way that Abraham showed great faith was in believing that he and Sarah would bear children. When God called them, they were already very old, and despite many years of marriage they had never been able to have children. Still, God promised Abraham, "[I] *will make you exceedingly fruitful… I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven."*[4] Common sense would hear those promises from God and think, "Yeah, right." But instead, Abraham chose to believe and rely upon those promises, even they seemed completely far-fetched.

In these and other ways, Abraham chose to depend on God, to trust that God would make all these things happen, even if common sense told him not to. The phrase Paul uses to describe this mental leap is beautiful but confounding. "*Hoping against hope, [Abraham] believed."* On it's face, it's an oxymoron. How do you hope against hope? If a house divided against itself cannot stand, then hope directed against hope would cease to be hope. But there is something in that, isn't there? The English language seems to think so, because it has become a common idiom. To hope against hope means to never give up, even when the odds are stacked against you, even when common sense says you cannot win.[5]

So, maybe they were onto something back in the Christmas of 1947. Maybe faith really is "believing in something when common sense tells you not to." But the more I thought about it, the more I felt… that's not quite it. That definition captures only part of what was going on with Abraham. In fact, it seems a bit reckless, doesn't it? If faith is as simple as ignoring common sense, then we might say that faith is illogical, reckless, absurd, perhaps even insane. And that can't be it… at least, that can't be all of it.

My thought is that there is something important that is missing from that first definition, and what that is, is **trust**. If we tell ourselves that faith is the antithesis of

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[1] "Faith," Oxford Languages on Google.com (emphasis added).
[2] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/faith (emphasis added).
[3] Genesis 12:1-2.
[4] Genesis 17:6, 26:4.
[5] https://www.centerforthenewevangelization.org/hoping-against-all-hope#:~:text=In%20common%20parlance%2C%20%E2%80%9Choping%20against,This%20certainly%20describes%20Abraham.

common sense, and that they are always at war with one another, then we might be tempted to say that Abraham's decisions based on faith were reckless. But that does not seem to be the way that Abraham felt about those choices. I don't think Abraham saw himself as turning his back on common sense. I think Abraham was simply choosing to trust something else more than he trusted his common sense. Maybe he decided that the guidance of God, the Word of God, was, in the end, more trustworthy and reliable than what we call "common sense."

Again, we should probably start by defining our terms. What do we mean by common sense? We could say it is basic knowledge and intuition that is shared and known by almost everyone. Common sense tells us not to touch a hot stove, and to look both ways when we cross the street. But it's rarely that simple. First of all, as the philosopher Voltaire once said, "Common sense is not so common."[6] Would you not agree that even smart, reliable people can make some stunningly bad decisions?

And how about Thomas Paine, who named his famous pamphlet "Common Sense." In it, he was encouraging farmers, blacksmiths, tailors, and other normal folks to declare independence, take up arms, and confront the deadliest military power in the world. Sounds a lot like touching a hot stove. We like to think of common sense as this solid, steadfast, and dependable source of wisdom, but the truth is that common sense can be very flimsy and unreliable because it, like us, is ultimately human… and anything human is fallible.

Think about it this way. Say we are facing a tough decision, and we try to lean on some good old fashioned common sense to help us make it. As we weigh the pros and cons, we try to think practically and reasonably. But where does that source practicality and reason live? It lives in our brain. And we might like to think that common sense would occupy the very best real estate in our brain -- a clean, pristine penthouse suite at the very top. But it's not, because there's no address like that in our brain. Our brain is all one address, and it is no penthouse suite. It is more like the squalid, smelly dorm room that some of us lived in when we were 18 – dirty dishes piled up in the sink… sheets haven't been changed in three months… dirty laundry hanging off of all the chairs. Our common sense, whatever that is, lives with us, and we are a mess!

If that image is too visceral for you, let me say it this way. Before a thought emerges from our common sense, that thought has run through a thousand filters in our memory and our subconscious mind. Whether we realize it or not, what we call common sense is deeply affected by our past experiences. It is running calculations based on prior victories and prior defeats… taking into consideration both our fears and our hopes. We think of common sense as being objective, but it can never be purely objective.

As a result, the people who read Thomas Paine's treatise on freedom came to a wide variety of decisions, most of which, they would say, were dictated by common sense. Some decided to rise up and fight with the patriots; others decided to support English rule; some moved West to avoid the whole thing. I would say that those decisions didn't have much at all to do with common sense. But they had everything to do with trust. Did they trust their neighbors more than the British crown? Did they choose to prioritize the values of freedom, or the values of self-preservation? What, and whom, did they trust?

All of this leads me to a different definition of faith. What faith seems to be for Abraham, for Paul, and really for us, is something more like this: **"Faith is trusting God even when the outcome is unknown."** It is actually right there in the text. God was asking Abraham to trust in a plan and a purpose that was beyond Abraham's scope of vision. Common sense would suggest that the things God was promising were dangerous, unpredictable, perhaps even impossible. Even so, scripture proclaims that Abraham was *"fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised."* Abraham did not depend on what he could see in that moment, or even on human logic. He depended on faith.

That kind of trust is what we are called to emulate. As Paul told the Corinthians, "*We walk by faith, not by sight.*" Or, as the wisdom of Proverbs puts it, "*Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge [God], and [the Lord] will make your paths straight.*"

Forgive me if you have heard me share this before, but it bears repeating in this context. In his book, Holy Sweat, author Tim Hansel described a hike that he once took with his son Zac. They were bouldering, climbing around on big rocks, and at one point, Tim heard his son call out from above, from way up on a huge boulder, "Hey Dad!" Zac yelled, "Catch me!"

As soon as Tim turned around and looked up, he saw that Zac was already plummeting joyfully down toward him. Zac had not waited to make sure his dad saw him or even heard him. He just jumped.

Fortunately, Tim was close enough and nimble enough to get himself between his son and the ground just in the nick of time. It took him a minute to process what had just occurred. All the terrible things that could have happened flew through his adult brain. What Zac had done made absolutely no sense to him. Finally, the father gathered himself enough to blurt out, "Zac! Can you give me one good reason why you did that?!?"

His son's beaming smile never wavered. "Sure," Zac said, "because you're my dad." Zac trusted in his father so completely that he knew – he just knew – that his dad would be there to catch him. That is faith -- trusting, even when the outcome is unknown.

You and I are built to take this leap of faith. Pillars of the church across the centuries have felt it. Theologians have observed it. Modern scientists have tested it. There is something woven into the core of every human being that is built to trust – trust that there is a higher power in the universe who loves us and is with us through every trial and every triumph. That part of us is deeper and stronger than anything we want to call common sense.

Faith is not a mathematical analysis; it is a primal instinct. It is not reasonable assurance of certain results; it is trust. It is not a calculated strategy; it is a leap. But that leap is not blind. It is a leap with eyes wide open, fixed on God, that says with joy "Hey, Dad, Catch Me!" **Amen.**