

Meeting Jesus: The Power of Trust
Genesis 12:1-4 and Romans 4:1-5 and 13-17
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota
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If you were meeting Jesus in the morning for coffee, how would you prepare your spiritual autobiography? What would you say about your life of faith?

For you and me, every spiritual question leads to these: How do you and I trust the grace of God in Christ? How may we open our hearts each day for that trust to grow and deepen?

Until a couple of days ago, Robert Kelly was not a well-known person. He is a professor at Pusan National University in South Korea, and from time to time is called upon by the BBC to offer on-air commentary.

Robert Kelly was Skypeing with the news anchor a couple of days ago, in the midst of a serious on-air conversation, when his young daughter, only three or four years old, danced into the room. By the time the anchor told Kelly, his youngest child had scooted into the room too. In the background, we watch Robert Kelly's wife dashing into the room, gathering up the children, and then dashing back out.

It is a hilariously funny moment, as any at-home working parent can testify, when one's family life and occupation rub against one another. For the rest of his life, in a completely unexpected way, Robert Kelly's biography will include a mention of his children's on-air news experience.

Our stories about meeting Jesus, our spiritual biographies are also both amusing and serious, happy and sad, tender and raw – and encouraging and strong.

The stories of Abraham and Sarah are an example. Commanded by God to begin a journey without an announced destination, they were promised by God that they would become a great nation and a blessing to all to follow. But there is no journey's end on the map, not announced safe harbor in which they will land, no certainty about objective and terminus.

They go, by faith. They go because of their trust in God.

So it is in the story of Mary. Shocked and surprised by the appearance of the angel, Mary listened dumbfounded as she hears promise after promise of God's presence and God's favor and God's intention that she become the mother of God's Son, Jesus, the Messiah, the One with an everlasting kingdom.

By faith, Mary responds, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord." By faith, she replies, "Let it be with me according to your word."

As with Abraham and Sarah, the promises were deep and rich and true. But they call forth a response of trust.

It is so important that you and I talk about our trust. It's so important that we Christians write and then repeat statements of faith, also known as confessions. Some of them, like the Apostles' or Nicene Creed, speak about our bedrock, the foundations of what we believe. Others of them, like the Barmen Declaration or the Belhar Confession, are rooted in the challenges of a particular place and time.

That's how it was for a group of eight women and men who gathered here at our church for a day and a half during January. The group came together, in this time of national division and discord, to share their spiritual autobiographies and to state their faith in Christ. You will be hearing more about that faith statement, entitled the Sarasota Statement, in the weeks ahead.

And that's how it is for us too, I think. What we say and believe about our trust in God often reflects the events of our own time, our own lives. And not unusually, these events are caught up in life and death.

About ten months ago, the wife of comedian Patton Oswalt, Michelle McNamara, died unexpectedly, leaving behind him and their young daughter, Alice. He talked about his grief recently, both in an interview with National Public Radio, and in his acceptance speech after winning an Emmy. It's an illusion, he said, when we look at superheroes, who so often in the comics and in movies deal with their grief by "learning martial arts and doing Cross Fit and getting really cut." No, he said, for him grief means "you tend to eat Wheat Thins for breakfast and rewatch *The Princess Bride* about eighty times and not sleep all that well."

In his acceptance speech, Patton Oswalt said he wanted to share his award with two people. "One of them, my daughter Alice, is waiting at home. The other one," he said, "is waiting somewhere else, I hope."

This is how we talk about our lives, by speaking honestly of our hope and our despair, by acknowledging our greatest joys and our deepest wounds. Through it all, we learn again to trust.

This is how we meet Jesus, by opening ourselves to the best and the worst, by facing and enduring the pain and by looking forward to promises still ahead.

There are spiritual biographies all around us. Our faith is strengthened as we encounter the faith of others.

The Apostle Paul summed it up this way. "I have been crucified with Christ," he wrote. "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And I now live my life by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

Every week, you and I can learn more about the spiritual biographies of others. I'm regularly blessed by learning about the people I serve alongside. I learn how deeply Kelly loves the church. I learn how centered Steven is on spiritual transformation. I learn how dedicated Rachel and Lisa and Pam are to their children and to the church. Just last week, I had the chance to sit one afternoon with a long-time member of our church, who was a pre-school teacher here at First Presbyterian Church from 1969 to 1986. Her face lit up as she spoke about her experience.

What is your spiritual autobiography? How would you speak of your life of faith?

How do you trust God? How do you open your heart each day for that trust to deepen?

Adam Weber is a pastor in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. In a recent article, he encourages all of us to reach out in trust. "Reach one more person for Jesus," he says, "tell them about the hope and joy and kindness and love you have found in the Lord." That's one of the reasons we are inviting John Vest to come and speak with us on Sunday evening, March 19, that all of us might learn better how to reach out and share the joy of our faith.

The way we love people enables them to trust.

This season of Lent, my spiritual autobiography includes a lot of tears. A month ago, a dear friend, Scott Hauser, a Presbyterian pastor in Wisconsin, died from an aggressive cancer. Here is Scott's spiritual autobiography, straight from Romans 14:8, "If we live, we live to the Lord; if we die, we die to the Lord. Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." He truly believed the very first line of our Presbyterian *Brief Statement of Faith*: "In life and death we belong to God."

On one of the last days of his life, Scott's wife, Lara, was about to leave the hospital. Scott was lying there in the hospital gown, head shaven, with an oxygen mask over his face. She asked him, "Who do you belong to?" He said, "I belong to God."

These days I sometimes have a vision of Scott. The vision, I think, is rooted in the twenty-second chapter of Revelation; it is an image of the heavenly city. “There is the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb, flowing through the middle of the street of the city.”

I see Scott, lying on a funeral bier, being carried down to the river. He still has on his hospital gown. His head is still shaven. He still has an oxygen mask over his face. But he is on his way down to the river. And then, right then, with the ravages of cancer, even with that ugly mask and gown, he is smiling.

I would say that I don’t know why he is smiling, right there at the edge of death. But he is smiling because he belongs to God. He is smiling because of his trust. He is smiling because that river is the water of eternal life.

If you were meeting Jesus in the morning for coffee, how would you prepare? What would you say about your faith?

As we meet Jesus, each and every day, around every corner and in every person we encounter, how will you trust God’s grace? How will you open your heart so that your trust may grow and deepen?