

Welcome to Summer Worship at Zion!

I LOVE TO TELL THE STORY
Rediscovering God's Grace in the Old Testament
"A God of Promises Kept"

1732 S. Main St. Aberdeen, SD 57401 605-225-6755
Email: zion@nvc.net Website: www.zionlutheranaberdeen.org

June 3, 2018 9:30 am

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*Rooted in Faith \* Growing in Spirit \* Reaching Out to Those in Need*  
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INTRODUCTION

This summer we are exploring the Old Testament stories of God's relationship with God's chosen people. Our scripture lessons for the summer begin with the early chapters of Genesis and move through the stories of Israel's early history, the exodus, the kings, and the prophets. The stories tell of hope and disappointment, suffering and redemption, love and forgiveness. In all these stories, we find God dealing with the complexities of human life.

GATHERING

PRELUDE/GATHERING SONGS	"Spirit Song"	John Carter
WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS		
OPENING SONG/HYMN <i>(please stand)</i>	"Blessed Assurance"	ELW #638

CALL TO WORSHIP

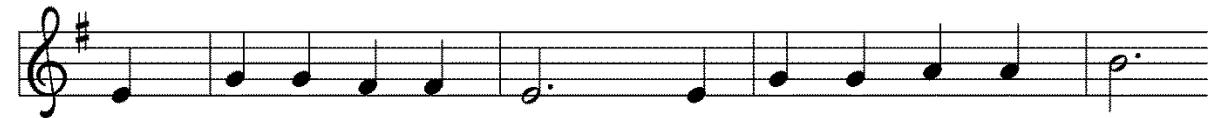
Let us worship the eternal God,
who is ever-faithful, in whom we can trust.

Let us worship Jesus Christ,
who takes our burdens from us and lives among us.

Let us worship the Holy Spirit,
the Living Presence, who teaches us to be trustworthy.

To the one true God be praise in all times and places, through the grace of Jesus Christ.
Amen.

KYRIE



1 Have mer - cy on us, Lord, and hear our sol - emn prayer.
2 Have mer - cy on us, Christ, and wash a - way our sin.
3 Have mer - cy on us, Lord; make sin and shame de - part.



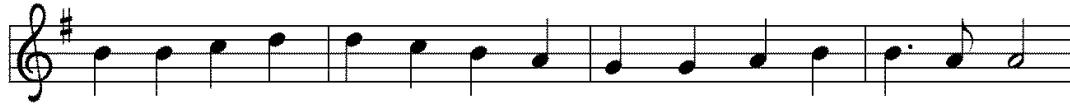
We come to hear your liv - ing word; it saves us from de - spair.
Pour out your grace and make us whole that new life may be - gin.
Re - new us with your sav - ing pow'r; cre - ate in us new hearts!

GREETING

The boundless grace of our risen Lord Jesus Christ, the wisdom of God, and the light of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

And also with you.

HYMN OF PRAISE



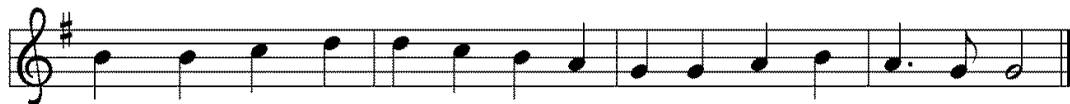
1 Glo-ry be to God in heav-en; peace, good-will to all the earth.
2 Glo-ry be to Christ for - ev - er, Lamb of God and Lord of love.
3 Ho - ly One we now ac-claim you; Lord a - lone, to you we call;



Might-y God of all cre - a - tion, Fa - ther of sur - pass - ing worth:
Son of God and gra - cious Sav - ior, you have come from heav'n a - bove;
Ho - ly One in faith we name you, God most high, yet near to all:



we ex - alt you, we a - dore you, we lift high our thanks and praise.
on the cross you died to save us; now you reign at God's right hand.
Je - sus Christ, with God the Spir - it, in the Fa - ther's splen - dor bright.



Saints and an - gels bow be - fore you; here on earth our songs we raise.
Hear our prayer; re - store, for - give us; in your prom - ise firm we stand.
For the peace that we in - her - it, glo - ry be to God on high!

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Let us pray. God of the covenant, as you promised Abraham descendants as numerous as the stars, you have also promised us that we might live under those stars as your people, faithful and loved. Show us how to live as your people, and how to nurture all your children with whom we share the same canopy of sky night after night.

Amen. *(please be seated)*

A TIME FOR CHILDREN

WORD

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 15:1-6

Pew Bible OT p. 13

SERMON

Pastor Marcia

HYMN/SONG OF THE DAY

“Standing on the Promises”

Standing on the promises of Christ my King,
Through eternal ages let His praises ring,
Glory in the highest, I will shout and sing,
Standing on the promises of God.
Standing, standing, standing on the promises of God my Savior;
Standing, standing, I'm standing on the promises of God.

Standing on the promises that cannot fail,
When the howling storms of doubt and fear assail,
By the living Word of God I shall prevail,
Standing on the promises of God
Standing, standing, standing on the promises of God my Savior;
Standing, standing, I'm standing on the promises of God.

Standing on the promises I now can see
Perfect, present cleansing in the blood for me;
Standing in the liberty where Christ makes free,
Standing on the promises of God.

Standing, standing, standing on the promises of God my Savior;
Standing, standing, I'm standing on the promises of God.

Standing on the promises of Christ the Lord,
Bound to him eternally by love's strong cord,
Overcoming daily with the Spirit's sword,
Standing on the promises of God.
Standing, standing, standing on the promises of God my Savior;
Standing, standing, I'm standing on the promises of God.

Standing on the promises I cannot fall,
List'ning every moment to the Spirit's call,
Resting in my Savior as my all in all,
Standing on the promises of God.
Standing, standing, standing on the promises of God my Savior;
Standing, standing, I'm standing on the promises of God.

CREED *(please stand)*

**I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.**

**I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.***

**On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.**

**I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.** *(please be seated)*

OFFERING

The children are welcome to come forward and place their offerings in the "For Children Everywhere" box.

OFFERTORY HYMN/SONG "Shout to the Lord"

My Jesus, my Savior, Lord, there is none like you.
All of my days I want to praise the wonders of your mighty love.
My comfort, my shelter, tower of refuge and strength;
Let ev'ry breath, all that I am never cease to worship you.

Shout to the Lord, all the earth let us sing
Power and majesty, praise to the King.
Mountains bow down and the seas will roar at the sound of your name.
I sing for joy at the work of your hands;
Forever I'll love you, forever I'll stand.
Nothing compares to the promise I have in you.

Shout to the Lord, all the earth let us sing
Power and majesty, praise to the King.
Mountains bow down and the seas will roar at the sound of your name.
I sing for joy at the work of your hands;
Forever I'll love you, forever I'll stand.
Nothing compares to the promise I have in you.

OFFERTORY PRAYER *(please stand)*

Faithful God, you have kept your promises to us. Our lives give witness to your abundant blessings. May we faithfully keep our promises to you. Strengthen our commitment to live as true disciples of Jesus Christ. Your love sustains us, guides us, and empowers us. Take these gifts as signs of our promise to give ourselves completely into your care—to live without fear; to trust your love without reservation. **Amen.**

MEAL

THE GREAT THANKSGIVING

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

WORDS OF INSTITUTION

LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father, who art in heaven,

hallowed be thy name,

thy kingdom come,

thy will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread;

and forgive us our trespasses,

as we forgive those

who trespass against us;

and lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom,

and the power, and the glory,

forever and ever. Amen *(please be seated)*

COMMUNION DISTRIBUTION

All are welcome at the Lord's table. Please come forward as directed by the ushers.

Grape juice and gluten free wafers are available; please indicate to the server by raising your hand.



1 O Lamb of God, you bear the sin of all the world a - way;

2 O Lamb of God, you bear the sin of all the world a - way;

3 O Lamb of God, you bear the sin of all the world a - way;



you suf-fered death our lives to save: have mer-cy now, we pray.

you set us free from guilt and grave: have mer-cy now, we pray.

e - ter-nal peace with God you made: give us your peace, we pray.

COMMUNION SONGS

“Great Is Thy Faithfulness”

Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father.

There is no shadow of turning with Thee.

Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not;

As Thou has been Thou forever will be.

Great is Thy faithfulness, great is thy faithfulness,

Morning by morning new mercies I see.

All I have needed Thy hand has provided.

Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord unto me.

Summer and winter and springtime and harvest,

Sun, moon and stars in their courses above.

Join with all nature in manifold witness.

To Thy great faithfulness, mercy and love.

Great is Thy faithfulness, great is thy faithfulness,

Morning by morning new mercies I see.

All I have needed Thy hand has provided.

Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord unto me.

Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
Thy own dear presence to cheer and to guide.
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside.

Great is Thy faithfulness, great is thy faithfulness,
Morning by morning new mercies I see.
All I have needed Thy hand has provided.
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord unto me.

“Faithful Father”

Father, I can't explain this kind of love,
This kind of grace.
I know, I still break Your heart
And yet, You run to welcome me.

This is my song of praise to You,
For who You are and all that You do.
From the moment my life began
You have been faithful.

Father, I love the way You hold me close
And say my name.
I know, when my life is through
My heart will find its home in You.

This is my song of praise to You,
For who You are and all that You do.
From the moment my life began You have been faithful.

This is my song of praise to You,
For who You are and all that You do.
From the moment my life began You have been faithful.

COMMUNION BLESSING

May the body and blood of Jesus, our Christ, liberate us from all that prevents us from being faithful and fill us with the desire to bear witness to God's love for us and one another.
Amen.

PRAYER AFTER COMMUNION

Dear God, we give thanks for your promised care. In the sharing of this meal, we participate in the fulfillment of your greatest promise. We celebrate our kinship with your Son, Jesus Christ, made known to us in the breaking of the bread of life and the sharing of the cup of salvation. May your Holy Spirit strengthen us, that we may go into the world to imitate Christ and live as witnesses of your promised love. **Amen.**

SENDING

BENEDICTION

Go in the love of God,
whose promises are never broken.

**We go in the light of Christ,
whose love transforms us.**

Go in the power of the Holy Spirit,
whose fire sustains and encourages us.

**We go now into the world as witnesses
of God's love, light, power and promise.**

May almighty God, Father, ☩ Son, and Holy Spirit,
bless you now and forever.
Amen.

CLOSING HYMN/SONG “Your Grace Is Enough”

Great is Your faithfulness oh God.
You wrestle with the sinner's heart.
You lead us by still waters into mercy.
And nothing can keep us apart.

So remember Your people,
Remember Your children.
Remember Your promises oh God.

Your grace is enough, Your grace is enough,
Your grace is enough for me.

Great is Your love and justice God.
You use the weak to lead the strong.
You lead us in the song of Your salvation.

And all Your people sing along.
So remember Your people,
Remember Your children.
Remember Your promises oh God.

Your grace is enough, Your grace is enough,
Your grace is enough for me.

Your grace is enough, Your grace is enough,
Your grace is enough for me.

So remember Your people,
Remember Your children.
Remember Your promises oh God.

Your grace is enough, Your grace is enough,
Your grace is enough for me.

Your grace is enough, Your grace is enough,
Your grace is enough for me.

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I LOVE TO TELL THE STORY

*REDISCOVERING GOD'S GRACE IN THE
OLD TESTAMENT*

COMMUNION PRAYER AND WORDS OF INSTITUTION

The Lord's Supper is the family meal of the church. In the Lord's Supper we partake of the body and blood of God's Son Jesus. The body and blood of Jesus are given in, with, and under the bread and the wine. God sent Jesus into the world to save us from our sinfulness. By raising Jesus from the dead, God affirmed that sin and death are not the final word for our lives and filled us with the hope of sharing in a new and glorious resurrected life with Jesus.

The meal we are about to share is a foretaste of this new life to come. It was instituted by Jesus on the night before he was crucified. Jesus and his disciples were eating together for the final time. Toward the end of this meal Jesus took bread, and gave thanks; broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying,

“Take and eat. This is my body, given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.”

Then he took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it for all to drink, saying,

“This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin. Do this for the remembrance of me.”

When we faithfully eat this bread and drink of this cup, we proclaim the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and receive the gift of the forgiveness of sins. May this gift inspire us to reach out in love toward all God's children and fill us with the hope of new life with Jesus and with one another in the family of God. Let us join now together in praying as Jesus taught his disciples to pray:

SCRIPTURE

¹After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." ²But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" ³And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." ⁴But the word of the LORD came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir." ⁵He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." ⁶And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

[Luke 12:32-40](#)

Dear Partner in Preaching,

One of my favorite questions to ask in visioning work or counseling sessions is as follows: “What would you love to try if you knew you couldn’t fail?” You may have heard that question, or asked it, yourself. I like it because it prompts us to cast our gaze beyond our present circumstances and challenges, elements in our lives that, while perhaps real, often cast a larger than necessary shadow. We are evolutionarily wired to overestimate risk and danger because, well, in a harsh environment underestimating risk and danger can be deadly. But one might argue that in our relatively civilized world, we often lose more to underestimating possibility.

You have to ask this question at the right time, of course, for it to do its work. When you’ve just come out of a difficult or harmful environment, you don’t have the resources to imagine a future, that while brighter, may also be more challenging or risky. A modicum of confidence or relative safety helps us to take on even greater challenges. Similarly, having a backer or mentor or advocate helps. Someone to support you, who has your back, who will champion your efforts and encourage you. In a sense, that’s what Abraham (then called Abram) receives from the Lord in today’s first reading. “Do not be afraid,” the Lord tells Abram, “I will guide you and protect you and give you offspring and a future you could not have imagined.”

Now, if someone had asked Abram what he would do if he knew he could not fail, I don’t know that he would have answered that he wanted to pull up stakes and move all his family across a continent. But that’s what he did. And that’s what vision and promise do – they enable you to do things you’ve never previously dreamed.

One could read Jesus’ promise in much the same vein. “Do not be afraid, little flock,” he says, “it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you all things.” And from that astounding promise comes the invitation, rather than command, to prioritize, to share, to be prepared for what comes, to give things away. And what’s the difference between a command and invitation, you may wonder. Only the force of how a statement strikes you. The one implies coercion; the other freedom. And promises always lead to freedom. Because we have Jesus’ promise that it is God’s good pleasure and heart’s desire to give us all good things, we are suddenly free to give away, to care for others, to lose ourselves in service, and in all these ways find our security and confidence not in our earthly possessions or accomplishments but rather in our relationship with God.

What an astoundingly different message that is than the one we hear in our culture and, this year in particular, from too many political candidates. Rather than tell us not to be afraid, would-be leaders relentlessly tell us, even shout at us, all about the things that we should fear. And such fear tends to limit our vision and paralyze our actions, thereby making it difficult to imagine a hopeful future, let alone work toward it.

Despite my affinity for the “vision question” I started with, I’ve been wondering lately whether I should modify it to make it serve better as an “action question.” That is, while it’s important to free folks to dream of life without limits, it’s also important to equip us to live with the very real challenges in front of us. So I would tweak the question slightly: What would we do, dare, attempt, not if we knew we couldn’t fail, but rather if we believed that failure didn’t matter. Not “didn’t matter” as in there are no consequences, but rather “didn’t matter” in the “it’s not the end of the world” sense. Because, indeed, Abraham will fail, at times spectacularly, and the followers of Jesus will experience multiple setbacks and disappointments. Yet they carried on, trusting that their future and self-worth were neither secured by their success nor eroded by even devastating setbacks, but rather were granted and made sure by God’s good pleasure and promise alone.

I think the call – or at least one of the primary calls – of the church today is to become a place where people are so rooted in the promise of God’s good pleasure, reminded of their identity as God’s beloved children, and affirmed in their inherent self-worth and dignity, that they can, indeed, see all those around them as similarly beloved and deserving of self-worth, dignity, and God’s good pleasure. The question for a Christian, you see, isn’t finally about some form of self-actualization but rather discovering that as we give ourselves away in relationship and service we find a deeper sense of self than we’d imagined possible. We are born for community and find a sense of self and meaning and purpose as we trust God’s promises and give ourselves away in love.

Toward that end, Dear Partner, might we end our service this week with a brief affirmation of God’s blessing and then send people into the world and all their various vocational arenas – home, work, school, places of volunteering – with the conviction that God – and this community! – have their back, are encouraging them in their challenges, inviting them to dream and strive, and counting on them for seeing those around them, and especially those in need, as their neighbor, a beloved child of God, and one perhaps set before them so that they may extend God’s love and promises? Might we send them out, that is, armed with God’s promises to live into and work for the Kingdom of God Jesus proclaims, reminding them that they need not fear and that their words and actions make a huge difference? The world needs the gifts and passion of your people, Dear Partner, more than they know. So let’s tell them. As you can tell, I think this is an incredibly important word to share, and I’m grateful for your willingness to bring your passion and creativity to this task. Blessings on your proclamation.

Yours in Christ,
David

Prior to this chapter the reader finds only divine monologues (12:1ff. 7; 13:14ff) but here we find a conversation. Abram chides God about the unfulfilled promise. The divine speech begins with the formula “do not be afraid.”

The dialog moves to Abram’s question in verse two where he laments his childless state. This lament/protest in verses two and three has Abram’s petition, “What will/are you giving to me?”; a reference to the promise of Genesis 12 is meant to reframe the reassuring opening of the chapter. The lack of an heir created economic havoc in antiquity for a person of means. The lack of an heir created psychological and theological havoc as well. Theologically it was interpreted as a sign of divine displeasure. At a psycho-social level it was construed as an emblem of shame because children were an artifact of honor.

Abram’s laments and protest do not lie in the air without divine rebuttal. But rather than providing proof of the promise, God dismisses Abram’s claim about his heir. Further, God doubles down on the promise of Genesis 12, namely “I will make you a great nation.” God brought Abram outside and uses a demonstration of the stars of the night sky as an analogy for the heirs of Abram. The instructions are, “go outside, look to the heavens and count the stars.”

The interchange ends. The writer describes Abram’s response to the conversation. There are two Hebrew verbs *aman* “to believe” and *chashab* “to reckon”. Both of these verbs in the Hebrew are active.

Righteousness is a term of relationship, a person in the honor position. When Abram recognizes the righteousness of God it reframes Abram’s earlier speech and in fact his whole world.

Verse 1 begins with a reference to some previous things, most likely the immediately preceding chapter. God’s word appears to Abram in a vision, reminiscent of the way that the prophets both hear and see God’s message (cf. Amos 1:1). The first thing Abram is told is not to fear, and continues by telling Abram that God will be his shield, words that must have been more reassuring after Abram had just been involved in battle to rescue Lot (Genesis 14: 14-15).

God also tells Abram that Abram’s reward (literally, his “wages” or “pay”) will be exceedingly great. This, too, connects with what has come before; when the king of Sodom told Abram to keep some of the goods from battle, Abram refused any of his commodities. The KJV translates the “reward” as God, such that God tells Abram, “I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward.”

Abram’s response to this revelation, however, is not one of gratitude. Rather, he asks a question that essentially amounts to, “What is my reward?”

Abram wants to know who God is, and how God can be trusted, particularly when there has been a delay between God’s promise and its fulfillment. Another paraphrase for Abram’s question in verse 2 is, “Really?” That question could be expressed in a tone of disbelief, or genuine curiosity, or some mixture of the two. God had promised descendants, but they have yet to be made real, so perhaps Abram is asking, “What will you give me? Is my reward to be something other than children?”

Verse 3 begins exactly the same way as verse 2, with the phrase “and Abram said.” It is as if after Abram first posed his question to God in verse 2, he does not leave any time for God to respond before Abram says something else. The urgency in Abram’s discourse points to the importance of Abram’s questions and concerns, as if he can’t wait to express them to God. Abram’s statement in verse 3 is less ambiguous than his question in the preceding verse. The only one poised to be his heir is this Eliezer of Damascus, who is only a servant.

Additionally, it is clear that Abram holds God responsible for his lack of an heir: “Look, you have not given children to me” (literally, “seed”). God’s promise to Abram has yet to come true. And yet, Abram must have a level of faith to even register disappointment that God has not yet done what God said God would do. That is, Abram expects -- and believes -- God will keep God’s word, which is why Abram speaks in the way he does.

God’s response is direct and reassuring: “This man will not be your heir, but rather one who will come from your body (Hebrew: ‘loins’) will be your heir.” Thus, God reiterates that Abram will have descendants and specifies that those descendants will be biological. But the reiteration and specification still requires trust, as God does not give Abram a date or time for this happening. It will not be until Genesis 17:21 when God tells Abraham that Sarah will bear him a son in a year. Though that is only two chapters later, it is at least thirteen years after God told Abram he would have a biological son, making it at least fourteen years before God delivers on this promise.[\[1\]](#)

In verse 5, God adds a visual to the promise. Abram is told to look to the night stars and count them if he is able, that his descendants will be that numerous. In the ancient desert, the number of stars must have been

staggering; he must have been able to see the swath of the Milky Way. In the years left to wait between this word and the fulfillment in Isaac's birth, Abraham must have been bolstered when he saw the night sky and remembered this word.

The final verse of this selection contains Abram's response: he believed in the Lord. The second clause, however, is ambiguous as to the subject and object. Most English translations preserve the ambiguity, "he reckoned it to him as righteousness." Is God the one reckoning, or is Abram? Those translations that capitalize the pronouns for God write, "and He reckoned it to him as righteousness," and the NRSV clarifies, "and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness."

The Hebrew, however, could just as well mean that Abram's belief led to Abram reckoning it to God as righteousness. The verb "reckon" can also be translated as "think, account, impute." If Abram is the object, and God is the subject, this would mean that Abram thought of God as righteous, imputed righteousness to God. Now, that may sound audacious: how can a human impute or reckon righteousness to God? Or, it may seem patently obvious; of course God is all righteousness, why does it matter if Abram thinks so or not?

However, the heart of this interaction is faith and trust. If Abram understands God to be righteous, to be one whose word is firm and secure, to be one who will make good on God's promises, then Abram can believe. The same is true for us. Belief is hard enough when there is a delay between God's promises and their fulfillment. It would be nigh impossible if the God in whom we believe is not trustworthy, is not righteous.

Learning Faith

Gen 15:1-18[1]

Most of us can say that at some point in our lives we have been shaped in a significant way by special people. If we're fortunate, we can say that there have been many special people who have shaped our lives. They may have been parents or grandparents, teachers or pastors, friends or colleagues. We tend to call them "mentors." They teach us something important about how to live and work and be better people. I've had many mentors in my lifetime, from family to pastors to professors to colleagues to friends. I've learned most of what I know about life and love and faith from them. Some of these people we look to as mentors in faith. We call them prophets, sages, and saint. Whether we're talking about Billy Graham, or Martin Luther King, Jr., or Mother Teresa, they are people who seem to have a kind faith that transcends what the rest of us seem to be able to attain.

That's why we look to them as mentors and role models. We call them saints because we recognize that they seem to have a higher level of faith in their interactions with God. It's tempting to put them "on a pedestal" to separate them from the rest of us. That can be just a convenient way to let ourselves off the hook so that we don't have to try to rise to a higher level. But a better approach would be to respect their faith in a way that challenges us to grow in our own faith. We recognize them as special people so that we may follow their example in an attempt to attain at least a small degree of their faith.

I think Abraham and Sarah were people like that. At an age when most people should be enjoying their twilight years in the safe and comfortable surroundings of home and family, they set out on what must have seemed like an improbable journey. They left everything behind because God called them to go to a place yet to be determined! And they did so based on a promise--that God would bless them and would make of them a great nation (Gen. 12:1-3). That must have seemed a strange promise, given the fact that they were childless and both of them were in their seventies! And yet, despite all the odds, Abraham and Sarah had a kind of faith that enabled them to look past all that.

Over the years, God continued to interact with Abraham and Sarah, repeating and confirming the promise to bless them. In our lesson for today, it would seem that Abraham has been doing some thinking about the promise. In fact, in response to God's reaffirmation of the promise of blessing, Abraham responds with a strange kind of faith: he asks a fairly direct question that might seem to contradict the whole notion that he had any faith! God appears to Abraham in a vision and says, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great" (Gen. 15:1). In reply, Abraham asks what God could possibly give him since he and Sarah were still childless. As the *Good News Version* puts it,

“Sovereign Lord, what good will your reward do me, since I have no children? (Genesis 15:2, TEV).

That may seem like a strange way to express faith. In fact, in many traditions, questioning God is considered to be the opposite of faith. And yet it is through his questioning that Abraham rises to a higher level of faith. Because of his question, God reinforces the promise using a means of “signing a contract” that was common in that day.

stronger for having questioned.

It seems to me that one way to learn faith is to pursue our questions. I think that ignoring them or suppressing them actually deprives us of the opportunity to grow. It’s understandable that we may not want to face our questions about God head on. Some of them can be frightening. Especially the ones that deal with the mystery of human suffering. It can be incredibly difficult to face the question of why bad things happen to good people--especially when you’re the one bad things are happening to! But like Abraham, when we face our questions, or perhaps even better, when we voice our questions to God, we give ourselves at least the chance of growing in our faith. It provides an opportunity for us to deepen our trust in God’s promise based on the “awareness that God really is God.” It creates an opening for us to affirm with the Psalmist that “I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living” (Ps. 27:13).

As we examine our faith during this year’s season of Lent, I think it’s important for us to realize that at least one way of developing the heart of trust and the eyes of faith is to give full voice to our questions about God. We may never get an answer to all our questions, but when we allow our questions to come out into the open, we open our hearts to experience the awareness that God really is God, and that we can entrust our lives into God’s loving care. It seems to me that’s how people who have the kind of special faith Abraham and Sarah had develop that special kind of faith. It’s a way for the “rest of us” to learn faith. It’s a way for us to imitate the faith of the saints who have gone before us (cf. Phil. 3:17), and so learn a higher and deeper faith ourselves.

In the case of Sarah and Abraham, their first “bad situation” was their inability to have a child despite the promise in Genesis 12:2 that God would make of them a great nation. Abraham had become so desperate that he proposed to adopt his servant Eliezer of Damascus as his heir.

God challenged this “Plan B” of Abraham and Sarah and said that only their naturally born child would be their heir. The Lord took Abraham outside, pointed him to the sky, and urged him to count the stars. That’s how many children you will have. Abraham thought this was a good idea. We do not know what Sarah thought of this proposal (wink, wink). Clearly this promise had the long view in focus: with the passing of generations the descendants of Abraham and Sarah would number in the thousands or even the millions. How like God: when the promise was hard to believe, God upped the ante.

This little story climaxes in verse 6. Abraham believed the Lord. That’s what humans are supposed to do with God’s promises -- trust them, accept them, and rely on them. The key to this verse -- and possibly to the sermon -- is the word “righteousness.” Righteousness in the Bible means living up to the obligations inherent in a relationship. In Genesis 38 Tamar was willing to do anything -- including sleeping with her father-in-law Judah -- to fulfill her obligation to bear a child for her deceased first husband Er. Hence she was called righteous by Judah.

But verse 6 is ambiguous, even ambivalent. As the note in the NRSV indicates, the words “the LORD” in the second half of the sentence “translates” the Hebrew word “he.” Hence we should read: “And he believed the LORD; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness.” This could mean: Abraham believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to Abraham as righteousness. In this case Abraham trusted God’s promise, and God indicated that the patriarch had fulfilled the obligations of his relationship with God by such trust.

But this sentence might also mean: Abraham believed the Lord; aye, Abraham reckoned that God’s doubling down on the promise was God living up to the obligations of his relationship to Abraham and Sarah. How typical of God. When we have trouble believing a promise, God makes the promise even better.

th Anchors

You

Genesis 15:1-6

10/22/2017

What great faith you have! I mean, you're here today! Now granted, you came to worship God— to sing his praises and hear him speak to you from the Bible. However, why did you show up today, on a Sunday, and not on a Monday? Why did you arrive at 9:00am [at Harrison; 11:00am, Clare] and not at 2:00pm this afternoon? Why are you sitting down with

bulletin and hymnal in lap, and not just mulling around with smartphone in hand? Why? Because you trust the promises made. A majority agreed to worship on Sunday mornings at 9:00am [at Harrison; 11:00am, Clare]. You asked your Pastor to prepare a Bible-based message and lead worship. So, you arrived at the right time at the right place for the purpose of praising God.

That takes faith, does it not? You trust that these events are going to happen. You expect to arrive on site and find a church building at this address. You expect to walk up to the front door, reach out, tug the handle, and the door will open (and not remain locked). You expect to sit down— not in an empty building, but gathered with your fellow Christians. You trust Pastor will be here to lead worship and share a carefully prepared (and thoughtful) message. You trust the promise made. That takes faith.

But... you could doubt those promises. Then what would happen? What if you did not believe we worship on Sunday mornings? What if you doubted that we gather at 9:00am [or 11:00am]? What if you did not think your Pastor would lead worship? What would happen? You would rely only on your thoughts and feelings! You could only find assurance in you— and what you felt would happen! Faith trusts promises.

Faith even trusts the promises of God— trusting that he will accomplish what he says he will do. Placing your faith on anything other than the Word of God will leave you floundering in the heaving waves of emotional despair. **Faith Anchors You to the completed work of Jesus and to the certain promises of God.**

Because that's what anchors do; anchors keep objects in place. Anchors keep boats from drifting across the ocean. Anchors keep your balloon from floating into the sky. Anchors keep your tent from tumbling away in the wind. Anchors keep your emotions, your fears, your worries fastened to the unchanging, guaranteed promises of God.

Just look at our reading, and recognize what God uses to anchor faith. **After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision. "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward."** What could ever make Abraham afraid? Just consider everything he has! Sheep, goats, steer swarm as far as the eye can see (and, not to mention, Abraham owns every single acre of this land). Maids rush in with dinner and out with dishes; in with clothing and out with laundry; servants feed cattle, pay bills, stand guard, tend to any need you might possibly have. Gunnysacks jingle with gold and jewels. Abraham even has an army— 318 fierce fighters. Kings respect him ([Genesis 14:21-24](#)). God's priest blesses him ([14:18-20](#)). What could Abraham possibly worry about? Something out of his control.

"O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir." But God promised! Everything moving around Abraham would belong to his child! ([12:7](#); [13:14-17](#)). No, not his head servant— but his own flesh and blood! Abraham must have a son!

But God made that promise 10 years ago. And nine months had turned into twelve months, one year becomes two years, two grows to five, five to ten... and he's still waiting; he's still waiting for God to place that baby into the crook of his arm.

And it's not the waiting that's the difficult part. Each passing year means Abraham is another year older. Abraham is 85-years-old. And his wife? She's 75-years-old. *"God, I'm waiting. God, I'm not getting any younger. God, human biology rules out having children. God, where's this promised child?"*

Because you do not see God keeping his promise, do you? That's the difficult thing about faith, is it not? Faith trusts something not seen. Faith considers the unseen promise as already having been kept. Faith is certain your Pastor will lead worship that takes place on Sunday mornings at 9:00am [11:00am]. Faith considers promises as good as done. And yet, when you see real problems with your own eyes, it often feels that those problems are the real thing— and the promise is just an empty wish.

God promises to send angels to protect you ([Psalm 91:11](#)), but you get hurt, you're sick, you have cancer. You see pain; you do not see protection. God promises to forgive you ([Matthew 18:18](#)), but you still feel guilt, shame, fear that you're going to hell. You feel guilty; you do not feel forgiven. God promises to work things for your good, but you don't see "good" ([Romans 8:28](#)). Loved ones die too soon. Living as a Christian in 2017 is not exactly popular. You're still sad, depressed; you feel empty— and you really don't know why. God makes promises, but you do not see answers. And if you do not see answers, then who can you trust?

Yourself, right? Abraham wants a child. He waits. No child. So, he has a child with his maidservant— and rejoices; he has an heir! ([Genesis 16:1-4](#)) You want safety, so trust your medical choices without praying at all. You feel guilty, so you try to feel saved by relying on how good of a person you are. If you consider God untrustworthy, you will place faith in yourself. That means, you rely on your own decisions. You trust you abilities to get healthier. You trust that you made

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Rev. Andrew Ewald

some decision to accept Jesus as Savior. You trust that God does not make things work for your good. You doubt God. You trust yourself. If you trust yourself, then you will push God away.

Do you see how God strengthens faith? It shows up twice in our reading: **[T]he word of the Lord came to him.** That's it! God does not snap his fingers, and *poof* a child drops from the sky. No thunderous guarantee: *"Abraham, this will happen on November 18th!"* God simply speaks; God reveals what will happen. **Eliezer will not be your heir.** You will have **a son coming from your own body.** God places Abraham's attention on his unchanging Word.

Abraham **believed the Lord.** It's more than Abraham believing that God exists. Faith is not that God is "somewhere out there." No, faith grasped God's promise. Abraham would have a Son. That Son would be great. That Son would be the Savior of the world. Yes, Abram never saw Jesus with his very own eyes. Yet, his faith had eyes. With the eyes of faith, Abraham watched Mary's Son stretched out on a cross because he [Abraham] doubted God. Abraham raised his eyes to the heavens, certain that God's Son would come down and bring him home. He trusted God's promise was as good as done.

Faith Anchors You to the completed work of Jesus. There may be times you are tossed about by your emotions. There may be times you do not feel saved. There may be times you want certainty that God is for you. In those troubling times, God speaks to you. Look to God's Word and see your Savior. See the One who died to remove your doubts. See the One whose blood covers over fears. See the One crucified for you and etches your name into heaven's book. Faith Anchors You to the completed work of Jesus.

That's why God could bolster Abraham's faith with his Word: **"Do not be afraid, Abram, I haven't forgotten about you. Don't be afraid Abraham, you will have a son. Don't be afraid Abraham, your son will lead to Jesus. Don't be afraid Abraham, I am your shield, your very great reward."**

You can plug your name in here too. *"Don't be afraid, Andy... Bob... Sue... Tom... Don't be afraid because that Christmas-day baby is still your Savior."* You may not have seen Jesus with your own eyes, but your faith clings to him. When you're terrified over sins, look to the cross; hear Jesus say *"I paid for them."* When you feel that you can never be forgiven, that God cannot possibly love someone like you, look to Jesus who says: *"If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven"* ([John 20:23](#)). If you feel that God has abandoned you, listen to the God who says: *"I have called you by name. You are mine"* ([Isaiah 43:1](#)). God is your shield—and notice the verb. Present tense means he remains your defense today. That bronze shield wards off the devil's temptations to doubt that you are anything less than a possession of God. Your God still comes to you with his Word and Sacraments to strengthen and grow faith.

After all, your faith is a living thing— just like a houseplant. What happens if you stop watering a plant? It dies, right? What happens if you do water it? It lives—and more than that, plants grow and spread and flower. Plants are living things; they are not static, they do not remain one size forever. Your faith is not static; it does not remain one size forever. It either grows or it shrivels. God doesn't water you, he feeds you with his Word.

That's why it is important to be in worship and hear his Word. That's why it is important to remember your baptism. That's why it is important to receive the Lord's Supper. God is strengthening your faith with these tools.

God is teaching you more about what he has done for you. God is combating the fears in your life. He is answering questions you may have. The more you stay away from the Word, the more you forget. The more you stay away from the Word, the more you will rely on your own decisions. The more you remain in the Word the more you know who your God is— and what he has done.

The more you remember your baptism, the more you realize that you have done nothing to save yourself. If you want to feel saved, then stop probing your emotions. See how God used water and a promise to adopt you as his child ([Titus 3:4-7](#)).

The more you receive the Lord's Supper, you again hear him say: *"Forgiven! Forgiven! Forgiven! I have given you the strength to say "No" to sin. You no longer live to gratify whatever feels pleasurable to you. You live to serve me. Imitate my patience, kindness, and love."* God remains your shield who uses Word and sacrament to defend you against the devil's accusations.

God is **your very great reward.** Notice the verb: "Is." Present tense. God constantly remains your priceless possession. Abraham has all this stuff— 318 fighting men, a large family, many servants, thousands of cattle, and a pile of wealth —and yet none of it compares to an ounce of what God gives him. All the stuff you have cannot even bring you one step closer to God, but the blood of Jesus can. And by faith you have that blood purifying and cleansing you ([1 John 1:9](#)).

God is your very great reward. He is the only thing you get to take out of this life and into the life to come. He's the one who fills you with real comfort in a world with lots of trouble in it. He's the only thing that assures you: "Everything is ok," even when there's hurricanes, earthquakes, and shootings. Jesus has already won. **Faith Anchors You to the certain promises of God.**

Over these past two weeks we have looked at **"What it means to be a Lutheran."** Martin Luther lived in a time where pastors taught him: *"The more you do, the more you will be saved."* Yet, he stood on Scripture— where God tells you himself: *You are saved by grace.* Jesus makes the payment God demands for sin. This payment is made for your benefit— without you asking, seeking, or deserving it. God hands you eternal life as a gift— a free present!

As you stand on Scripture, you see that you are saved by grace, and that grace enters your heart through. Place your trust in what God has done for you and not on how you feel. Take God at his Word. **Faith Anchors You to the completed work of Jesus and to the certain promises of God.**