

The LORD had said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you.

- ² *“I will make you into a great nation
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.*
- ³ *I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.”*

⁴ *So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. ⁵ He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.*

⁶ *Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷ The LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.*

⁸ *From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD. (Genesis 12:1-8)*

Abram Followed God’s Promises

“I’ll take care of it. I promise.” “I give you my word.” “I swear” or even “I swear to God.” Why do we say things like that? To assure the person we’re talking to that we’re going to keep a promise. When we do that, don’t we hope that the person who hears our promise believes it? The promise itself invites the person who hears it to trust it. When we talk about God, we call trusting his promises *faith*. Our Lutheran forefathers liked to say that faith is the hand that grasps the promises God makes. And that faith itself is born from the promises. There’s a sense in which all promises engender trust. If that weren’t true, we wouldn’t make so many promises when people are scared or when they need something to hang on to. But when it comes to God’s promises, we mean something greater. God’s promises have God’s power built into them. That power gives birth to the faith, to the very hand that then grabs those promises. This morning, we see just how great an impact on our lives that faith really has. We see it in the life of a man that we usually call Abraham. Before God gave him that name, he was known by a similar but shorter name, Abram. **Abram followed God’s promises.**

I.

He trusted in them for this life and for the life to come. This chapter records the first time God made promises to Abram. But it wasn’t the last. In fact, when God changed his name to Abraham, he did that in connection with another promise. But this is when it all began. Abram was living in the country that we call Iraq. God called him to go to Canaan – modern day Israel – a land he had never seen, a land that lay 500 miles away in an age when you travelled by caravan and you couldn’t go any faster than the youngest animal in your flock could walk. God called Abram to leave everything that he knew behind, except his wife and his nephew, and go. How could Abram obey that command? Almost 24 years ago, I received a call to go to South America to serve as a missionary. But I always expected to come home again. We visited our family in the states every year. Parents and siblings visited us there. My parents were actually in Colombia when my oldest child was born. But Abram never expected to go home again. How could he do that?

God made promises to him about that journey and Abram trusted those promises. Now, the driving force in faith is not my commitment, or my acceptance of God’s promises, or the strength of my will. The driving force in faith is the power of God built into his promises. That power changes all that we are. And it changes what we do and what we choose and what we want. God said, **“I will make you into a great nation**

and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

God promised to protect Abram. God promised to make him famous. God promised a seventy-five year old man without children that he was going to have so many descendants that they would become a great nation. A little later in the reading, God promised to give this entire land to those descendants. Those are all promises that have to do with this life. They all have a spiritual content, but they focus on the here and now. And God’s power in those promises was so great that Abram could go to that distant land and live the rest of his life there without actually seeing the fulfillment of many of them. When he died, his family didn’t own the land yet. And far from being a great nation, he had one son and two grandsons. But Abram trusted God’s promises and he followed them to a new life in a distant land.

God makes promises to you and me. They have the same power built into them. God promises to bless us and care for us and always do what’s best for our faith. God promises to be with us and to hear and answer our prayers. And God makes promises to do all things for the good of his church. He promises that wherever two or three of us come together, he is with us. So he’s here with us today. He promises that his word never returns to him empty. God gives those promises so that he can reach into our hearts and stir them to greater trust in him. Then that trust follows him. We live our faith in a hostile world. We gather as the body of Christ in spite of all the devil’s raging. We carry out our mission, just like Abram did. It’s not to travel to a distant land and live there. It’s to live and serve God here. By the power of God’s promises, we do that.

But God didn’t just give Abram promises for this life. He said, **“All peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”** That is a promise of the coming Savior. The whole world is blessed because Jesus was born from Abram’s descendants two thousand years after God made this promise. He is the answer that every person on earth needs. In what sense? Well, a minute ago when I was talking about following God’s promises, you might just have felt a little guilty because you don’t do that nearly enough. Guess what? Neither do I. Even though God works through his promises and changes our hearts, for as long as we live here, we’ll still have an unbeliever deep inside us. That sinful nature inside us wages war against our faith. In the same day, I can stand up here and tell you about the richness of God’s love and then go home and lose the battle against my sinful nature and go to bed wracked with guilt.

I’m not alone. The whole world is desperate to be freed from guilt. It leads to paralyzing anxiety. It leads to self-torture and defeat. It leads to depression and self-destructive behavior – and finally, to hell itself because that’s what our sins deserve. But in Jesus, we have peace. During this Lenten season, we will follow him to the cross again where he sets us free from guilt and pain. We talk a lot about Jesus being innocent when he died on that cross, but when we say that, we don’t mean that he somehow got trapped in a situation that he didn’t create. He wasn’t a child who got caught in the crossfire between two rival gangs or someone who was minding his own business when a drunk driver slammed into him. Jesus went looking for the drunk driver, for the gang war, for the deadly situation that every human being was born into. Jesus went looking for our sin, for our guilt, for our anguish before God over all that we’ve done wrong. He suffered for it all. He let God pour down on his head all the real hell we have coming. He died and he paid for us. Then he rose to tell us we’re free. Our sin is gone. God does not consider us to be guilty anymore. In that announcement, he gives us peace. He ends our pain and our need to torture ourselves. Every person on earth needs that. Jesus came to give it to the whole world.

God promised Abram that his distant descendant would do all that. That promise changes our lives here. It enables us to cling to Jesus no matter how hard things get here, no matter how heavy the cross weighs on our shoulders, no matter how hard it is to understand the struggles we have in our lives and in our church. That promise is God’s power to comfort our hearts. My friends, Jesus came to set us free. One day, we will stand with him. We will never hurt again. And we will look back over all that was hard here and over all that we struggled with and we will see how richly and completely God loved us. And we will be amazed. Trust that promise! Follow it with a life of faith!

II.

God’s promises – especially the promise that in Christ all your sins are forgiven and you will stand with him on Judgment Day – are the battery that powers your faith. Then that faith turns you into something different than you would have been. Those promises make you a child of God and an heir of eternal life. Abram’s faith is a mirror of our own. When you study his life, you see the highs and the lows a Christian can

experience here. When God introduces him to us, he shows us first and foremost a believer in a world that isn't always kind to believers. **Abram followed God's promises. He proclaimed them in a new land.**

Moses tells us that Abram traveled to the great tree of Moreh in Shechem, roughly in the middle of Israel. From there, he traveled around and finally pitched his tent between Bethel and Ai. Moses tells us that the Canaanites were in the land. This was their land and Abram was a foreigner. But Abram built an altar and called on the name of the LORD. What does that mean? Many times in the Bible "to call on the name of the LORD" means worshipping our God – just like we're doing right now. But the Hebrew expression is somewhat flexible. It can mean "to call on the name of the LORD" but it can also mean "to call out the name of the LORD." In other words, it means to proclaim his name. In the end, the best way to worship God is to proclaim his wonders and his love for his people. That's what Abram did for another 100 years before he died.

What does that teach us? It teaches us that God wants his people to talk about his love and his promises. It teaches us that God has a mission for his church that will continue until Jesus comes back and he wants us to take that mission seriously. And it teaches us that God works through that gospel message. That's the only way he's given us to bring other people to faith. Knowing that God's promises apply to you makes you want other people to know those promises, too. It's natural for you and me to do our part. God gave us our faith. God gave us his promises. And God has given us his mission.

You and I are very much like Abraham. Not in the sense that we came here from somewhere else. Most of us didn't. Yet, like Abram we are strangers here. Every Christian is just passing through on his way to heaven. Every Christian has God's promise that he will protect us from all harm and danger on the road through this life. Every Christian has the promise that when Jesus returns, we will rise and live, that God will give us a new heaven and a new earth, an inheritance greater than any inheritance here could ever be. We are like Abram in that we are God's witnesses. We have the good news about Jesus. We have a treasure that the whole world needs. We know how God kept his promise to bless this world through Abram. And we can now offer the peace that only Christ can give.

Are we eager to do that? Are we like Abram, willing to proclaim the name of the Lord in a world that doesn't really know him or understand him? I hate to even ask the question because I know that question makes me feel guilty. Even though I've been a pastor for more than two decades, even though I've taken hundreds of people through classes to know their Savior, I'm not always eager to talk about my faith to other people. I find it hard and scary to witness. Does that surprise you? It shouldn't. I'm a sinner just like you are. My sinful flesh doesn't want me to do this. I have to fight the same battle you do.

Yes, it's sin not to want to share the good news. But the good news tells me that I am forgiven. The good news tells me that Jesus has paid for all my weakness and fear. And it tells me that God's promises are filled with power for me, power to face my fears, power to overcome them. Then God only asks me to share that good news. He doesn't ask me to win converts. He doesn't ask me to convince anybody. He asks me only to share the good news and let him change hearts.

He does the same for you. Your job and my job in all this is to just get his message out. But the power is in the promise. It's in the gospel. It's in the good news. The power to change unbelievers into Christians and the power to conquer our own fears. Embrace that power! Trust God's promise! Share his message! That's what God wants us to do. That's what God wants us to know. To make sure we understand, to make sure that we grow in faith and do the work he has given us to do, God repeats these promises over and over again. In Christ we conquer. Jesus will be with us in this life while we do his work. Jesus will bring us home when our work is done. Amen.