

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.”*

² *But Abram said, “O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?”* ³ *And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”*

⁴ *Then the word of the LORD came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir.”* ⁵ *He took him outside and said, “Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”*

⁶ *Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness. (Genesis 15:1-6)*

Faith

When you go to a funeral because someone you know just lost a spouse or a child, what do you say? How do you make them feel better? Or when someone you know unloads on you all their frustrations about work or their marriage or about how unhappy they are with their life, what do you say? If you're like me, you often walk away wishing you knew what to say to make them feel better – and I'm a pastor! It's my job try to comfort people who are hurting. Over the years, I've wrestled with that. I've read websites and books about comforting the grieving and the dying and they often talk about just being there for the person. I understand that. It's certainly something we can do. A Methodist pastor once talked to me about “pastoral presence.” I think he meant that your pastor represents Jesus to you, so when I come to your hospital room and pray with you and read God's Word to you, it's easier for you to believe that Jesus really is paying attention. I've found that to be helpful. Sometimes just letting someone talk about what hurts and why is therapeutic. I've seen that happen. But it's still true that it's hard to comfort people. In the end, the best we can do for people who are hurting and struggling is to encourage and feed their faith. This morning, we see one of the great Old Testament heroes of faith needing encouragement and comfort. So we want to see how God fed his faith.

I.

The first thing that Abraham shows us is that **faith comes from God's impossible promises**. You all heard his complaint, right? He didn't have any children. Abraham was an old man. He was 75 years old when he moved to the Promised Land. This incident had to be at least a couple of years after that. So he had to be somewhere around 80. While 80 for Abraham doesn't seem to have been like 80 for you and me, it was still highly unlikely that he ever was going to have children at this point in life. So he complained. God had made him wealthy. He had protected him from harm. But Abraham didn't have a son to pass it all on to.

In that time and place, having a son to carry on your name was incredibly important. It was viewed as a kind of immortality. But there is more to Abraham's complaint than that. God had promised Abraham that all nations would be blessed through his seed, his physical descendants. That was a promise of the coming Savior and Abraham understood that. His descendants would become a great nation that would possess the Promised Land and Jesus was going to be born from them. But if Abraham never had a son, how could those things come true? Abraham was beginning to doubt God's promises. He was even feeling a little sorry for himself. Understand Abraham was not a rank unbeliever. He had left his home and family because God told him to. He had heard and trusted God's promise of a future Savior. He was as much a believer as we are.

But he still felt that God had not kept the promises he had made. And you know what? It would be two more decades before God actually gave him a son. But God didn't leave Abraham twisting in the wind. He came to him with a promise: **“Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.”** Then when Abraham answered with a complaint about the way God has been taking care of him, God took him outside and asked him to count the stars. Even here in the city where we have so much background light at night, you can't do this. Imagine being Abraham out in the country, stepping outside his tent and seeing all the

heavens in the vast array. Imagine him looking up and trying to do it – one, two, three – until he lost his place and started wondering, did I count that one already? Or more likely, just looking up and realizing he could never do it. Then God promised him, **“So shall your offspring be.”**

This was God’s promise to give Abraham that seed, that nation that would be a blessing to all nations. This was a promise that Israel would come from him and Jesus would come from Israel, the very Jesus who died and paid for our sins on Good Friday and rose again on Easter Sunday. While Abraham couldn’t possibly know all the details of that Savior, he did know what God was promising.

At 80 years old, give or take, that was an impossible promise. But that was God’s answer to Abraham’s doubt and his self-pity. Moses tells us, **“Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”** Was Abraham any closer to the fulfillment of this promise than he was before? No. Isaac was still the same two decades away. Abraham would not live to see even the beginnings of the great nation of Israel. Jesus would not be born for another two thousand years. But hearing the promise – the same basic promise that God started the conversation with – renewed Abraham’s trust when it was failing.

My friends, our faith is no different from Abraham’s. Sure we know the details of Jesus’ life and death and resurrection which we just celebrated in Holy Week, the culmination of all God was doing. But even so, our faith is the same as Abraham’s. We trust in the same God and the same Savior. Our faith comes from the same gospel and works in the same world and struggles with the same weaknesses and doubts and self-pity as Abraham’s did. And God renews it in the same way: with his impossible promises.

Almost every week, I sit down with someone who needs comforting. And I never feel adequate to the job. But I have the gospel, the impossible promise of God. That’s where our faith comes from and that’s what God uses to renew it. So what do I do? I listen to the hurt, to the sorrow, to the struggle. Then I point to God’s promises: Jesus will be with you to the very end of the age. Jesus will give you strength to endure all this hurt. Jesus knows what you are facing right this moment and he sent me here as your pastor to comfort you. Jesus will use whatever this hurt is for your good, to strengthen and purify your faith, and he will bring you home. Jesus hears all your prayers and he will solve this problem, either in this life or in the life to come. How do I prove all that? By pointing to the cross and the empty tomb. There on that cross, Jesus died for you and for me. He died because we sinners deserved to spend eternity in hell. We deserve all the hurts we’re experiencing right here and now. He died because he loves us. No matter how much your life hurts, he proved his love when he endured death and hell for you. And then Jesus rose. He has all power over life and death. He rose and he will keep all those promises.

Do you know what happens when I share that gospel – when you share that gospel? The Holy Spirit works. He renews our faith in the power and love of God. He does a true miracle: God comforts the hurting believer by strengthening their trust in what he is doing. Sometimes, we compare all this to what we parents do with small children. When they’re scared, when they’re hurting, when they’re sad, we make promises to them and they feel better because they trust us. God does use images like that to help us understand the process. But the gospel is not just another psychological tool that any therapist can use. It is the power of God to create faith. It’s natural for children to trust their parents. But it is not natural for sinners to trust their Savior. It is not natural for sinners to know that God will work in all our hurts and sorrows and bring us home. Our sinful hearts rebel at that message and mock it.

But that message is the very power of God. Through it, the Holy Spirit takes hearts that are breaking and he renews their trust and in that trust, he provides a comfort that only we believers can know. Those promises enable us to cling to those very promises until the day comes when they are fulfilled. Sometimes that takes years. Sometimes we won’t see it in this life. But Jesus who died and more than that, who rose, works through the promises to keep us trusting in those promises. In him we find comfort and strength.

II.

Abraham shows us the comfort that faith in Christ gives us when we don’t understand what God is doing. But there is an even greater value to our faith. Abraham shows us that, too. **Faith makes us righteous in God’s sight.** That’s what Moses tells us: **“Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”** This is one of the most important verses in the entire Old Testament. It’s quoted at least three times in the New Testament. In fact, St. Paul uses this very passage to point out that you and I are really children of Abraham because we share his faith. So we have the blessing that God promised would come on all nations through Abraham’s seed. We have Jesus.

Trusting in Jesus makes us righteous in God's sight. Now, how does that work? First of all, you have to understand that faith is not a work we do. It's not that Jesus did his part in dying and rising and now we have to do our part by believing in him. Faith is not something meritorious that earns us something. And it's not a choice we make. We Americans are very confused on this issue. Our Lutheran forefathers said that faith is the hand that grasps God's gift. They would use the illustration of a king or a rich man talking to a poor, starving man. Think of someone who lives in the street and hasn't eaten for days. So the rich man reaches into his wallet and pulls out a hundred dollars and hands it to that poor man. That man reaches up and takes the money. Did his action of taking the money earn him that money? No. The money was a gift. Taking it really said that the man trusted that the gift was his. Now, in our age of decision theology, that illustration doesn't work as well as it once did. People insist on making the "taking" a work we do. But it isn't. Faith is a gift of God. It comes from his promises. But faith does grab on to what Jesus did for us once God gives us that faith. In that sense, we do grab on, because God doesn't believe for us. He puts faith in our hearts and we do believe.

True faith is all about what Jesus did for us. Like Abraham, we can get pretty whiny in our faith. We can feel sorry for ourselves. We can doubt God's love and his mercy and his working in our lives. We ask, "Why is God doing this?" "Why am I still here?" "Why doesn't the pain go away?" But "Why?" is the one question God never answers. He just promises that he's working for our good and tells us to trust him. But the why question shows that sin continues to damage our faith. After a lifetime of showing us his grace and repeating his promises, what should God do when we whine and complain about his love? He should say, "I've had enough!" and then he send us to hell.

But that's not what he does. He deals with us like he dealt with Abraham. He remembers that even when our faith is weak, it's still there. It still grabs on to Jesus. So when God looks at us, he chooses not to see our sin and our weakness. He chooses to see Jesus instead. So what he sees is perfection – a perfect life of love and trust in him. What he sees is all our sins and weaknesses paid for at the cross. What he sees is a living Savior who came out of the tomb because he had conquered death and hell for us. So he declares us righteous in his sight. That's the verdict he enters in our record. Then he closes the book.

Hearing that good news is what heals the weakness in our faith. Now, because we live here in this sinful world, we will need to hear that good news and be healed over and over again. If God grants it, I will sit by your bedside on the day you die and I will tell you that Jesus died and rose for you and that you are going to see him today. But whether I get to do that for you or not, that promise will still be true. Jesus died and he rose for you. He gave you the faith that trusts in him. That faith is his power to defeat your very death. It will carry you to eternal life. And that good news about Jesus is the promise and the comfort that we share with every hurting believer. Even when we can't see that it did any good, we trust the power of God to strengthen and to comfort his children for as long as we have to endure the pain of life here and then to take us home to heaven. Amen.