**Genesis 15:1-6** October 22, 2017

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*Genesis 15:1 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.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Faith Alone**

**I. The Need**

 I have never been in combat, so I don’t know how Abram felt. But some of you have, so perhaps you do. Our reading starts by saying, ***“After this…”*** This is after Abram came home from the battlefield. In chapter 14, he had gone into combat to rescue his nephew and his whole family who had been captured and abducted by foreign fighters. Abram took a force of several hundred men, tracked down the foreign fighters, ambushed them at night, and got his nephew and family back. It was a stunning success. He recovered all the captives.

 ***“After this,”*** the Lord appeared to him. But this “afterward” wasn’t that same day, when Abram was still on the adrenaline high. Maybe a few days, maybe a couple weeks passed and Abram was in a low. I can’t speak for soldiers, but we have all felt it. So often the high points of life are followed by the lows. After the family get-togethers of Thanksgiving and Christmas comes the loneliness of the January winter. Who doesn’t shudder to think of it, even if you like winter?

 And so it was with Abram. He had been victorious in battle. He was wealthy, not in a Bill Gates sort of way, but still way beyond what any of us could hope for—he had servants, over 300 servants in his house. Yet after victory on the battle field, we find Abram awake at night, wondering what the point of it all is.

 While all else turned out well for Abram, he had pinned his *deepest* hopes on a promise. And that promise was the one thing that was not turning out right.

 The promise Abram was thinking of was what God promised him in a far-off land. Years before, the Lord had told Abram to leave his idolatrous homeland and strike out on his own. God promised to show him a new land and give it to him. God promised to give him numerous descendants. God promised to make him a blessing to all the world, and in that promise is the implicit promise of the Savior. This was God’s promise.

 God’s promises had made him leave parents and home town. Those promises depended on the one thing 80 year old Abram didn’t yet have – a child. It’s like he was all dressed up with nowhere to go. He had everything, except the one thing he had wanted from the beginning.

 Every day Abram aged a little more and the hope of a child disappeared further in the rear view mirror. So when the Lord appears to Abram we hear a lament—not really a complaint, but the sorrow of an aching heart, ***“O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless?... You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”*** (2-3)

 We often see the great ones of the Bible so affected. Though we think they had an unshakeable faith, here we discover that they shared the anxiety we feel. The Apostle Paul repeatedly pleaded with God to take away the physical ailment that plagued his life. The prophet Elijah, one day had prayers answered from heaven with fire, but before the month was out he was pleading with God, “Please kill me. I can’t go on.” Abram had more than most people could hope for in life and he says, ***“O Lord, what can you give me?”***

 Why does God do this? Why does he show us his grace and then hide behind a curtain? Why does he give us a taste of victory, but then return us to the trenches?

 I can’t answer that question in a specific sort of way, but what God did with Abram is that he used the situation to draw Abram close to him.

 The central theme of our readings is “Faith alone.” Faith cannot exist unless we have a need. When we get up from the Thanksgiving table we don’t want another bite to eat. We need to feel hunger to want food. And we must feel a need in order to want God. In every difficulty of life God teaches us to tie our fortunes to him, not to the hopes and dreams of this life.

 Abram would not have put his faith in the Lord if he had not had a need. Each and every need that we feel in life, is a reminder that we need something outside of ourselves. Especially the feelings of guilt and anxiety lead us to realize that we need someone else.

**II. The Promise**

 When Abram felt that need, the Lord came to him with his promises. ***“Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.”*** This part of the promise to Abram is God’s promise to each and every one of his children. Just as he said, “Do not be afraid, Abram” you can put your own name in that sentence: “Do not be afraid, Marie. Do not be afraid, Roger.” ***“I am your shield, your very great reward.”***

 We know that God’s promises are better than anything this world can give us. All of them are wrapped up in Jesus Christ. One New Testament Bible passage tells us, *“No matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ.”* (1 Corinthians 1:20)

 But why are God’s promises “Yes” in Jesus? It is because Jesus is the one who makes us acceptable to God. Without Jesus, we simply are not. Without Jesus, we are sinful, spiteful, selfish people who want things our own way.

 This came out this last week while we were preparing for Fall Festival. My wife and I had never heard of a cake walk before. Even though it wasn’t our responsibility we were curious. So we did a little informal research, my wife and I independently, asking a few questions about cake walks. And you should have heard it. Teeth bared, angry eyes, all this hurt and resentment boiled to the top at the mention of cake walks! People who felt they had been cheated out of cakes, given the wrong cake, unfair competitions, cheaters, etc. And that was for cake walks! It was so petty and trivial, and frankly unforgiving, unloving and downright sinful. But we each have these ridiculous grievances. For some people it’s cake walks. For others it’s our money, our private time, our private lives, our vehicles, our music—you pick it. We have those areas in our life where we say, “My way or the highway.” Or, “If you mess with this part of my life, I will never forgive you.” We say it even to God, and to God’s church.

 Which is why God’s promises to us are “Yes” only in Jesus. Because Jesus has cleansed us from our hatefulness, our pettiness, our sinfulness, our bossy boorish behaviors and our stinging words. He takes it all away through his sacrifice for our sins on the cross. And after we have visited that cross, we walk away cleansed. And now, like beloved children, God makes his promises to us.

 For Abram, it was a little different. The book of Genesis not only portrays the good things about Abram, but the bad stuff too. So we know he too needed a Savior too. But it was a little different because he was waiting for the Savior we have seen.

 Aged Abram’s hope of a Savior was wrapped up in a child who had not been born to him, and so God had more words for him, ***“‘[Your servant] will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir.’ He took him outside and said, ‘Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them… So shall your offspring be.”***

**III. Faith**

 When Abram stepped outside his tent and looked at the sky, you know what he did. He believed. He didn’t do anything else. He just believed. When God made promises, Abram was the opposite of that child many years ago who got a rose as a present for his mother. That was a time of simpler gifts. He bought one rose for his mother. He wanted to give her this beautifully opened richly colored rose, but all the florist had were tightly furled roses, days from opening. So the boy, wanting to give his mother the most beautiful flower in the world, decided to open the rose—and he destroyed it. Abram knew when to act, but now was not one of those times. God’s promises would unfold in their time. Abram’s job was to simply believe. And he did.

 He can teach us more about faith. What the world typically means with the word “faith” is simply hoping against hope, an optimism, even when we have no reason to believe something to be true.

 Suppose that you are hiking with a friend. You are trapped on a ridge in the high mountains as it gets dark. A chilling fog moves in. You will die if you don’t find shelter. The only hope you have is to perhaps find a ledge somewhere that will give you shelter. Your friend walks over to the edge of the abyss and says that you must jump off the edge in hopes of landing on such a ledge. You think he has gone mad. It would be crazy to go jumping off mountains, hoping there will be a ledge ten feet down through the thick fog. Most people think that’s what faith is: Sheer, unreasonable madness, hoping for things you have no reason to hope for. That is not Biblical faith.

 You are still up there listening to your friend, but here is something I didn’t tell you. Your friend grew up on this mountain and has hiked it all his life. He tells you, “About ten feet down is a ledge and a small cave that can keep us both alive through the night. I have been there.” You have a reason to believe. Your faith is based on the character of your friend and the knowledge he has. Faith is not a mad hope. It is a certainty. That is closer to biblical faith. [[1]](#footnote-1)

 Our faith is worked by the Holy Spirit, but it is also reasonable. The Scriptures reveal God’s plan for our salvation in words we can understand, in a plan that is reasonable even if it is miraculous. And because God has said it, we accept it.

 That is faith. It is a knowing. Yet it isn’t simply that we know the right facts. As James says, *“You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder”* (2:19). It is more than knowledge

 Faith also involves our feelings and emotions. Faith involves the whole person, body and soul, reason and emotion. And so when Abram heard God’s words of promise it wasn’t just a matter of having the right information, like having the right pressure for your tires or the right temperature oven for your brownies. When Abram heard and believed God’s promises, his emotions were engaged. He washed his fears and anxiety down the drain. He put his trust in God. As a child waking from a nightmare is soothed by a parent’s presence, God’s promises also give us peace of mind. As seeing a much wanted birthday present makes our face light up with joy, so faith in God’s good news brings us joy. As knowing the location of an award ceremony makes us determined to get there in time, so the certainty of God’s gift of heaven fills us with a determination to finish life’s race well. Faith is a feeling too!

 That is biblical faith: it has a knowledge and trust in God.

**IV. The Verdict**

 But this is the best thing about faith: ***“Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”*** The best thing about faith isn’t that it satisfies my rational and emotional needs, but that God “credits it to me as righteousness.”

 Abram did a lot of good and godly things. He left his family and homeland in order to follow God. He protected his nephew, even to the point of going to war for him. He was generous and prayed for others. About none of those deeds does it say, ***“and the Lord* *credited it to him as righteousness.”*** It says that when Abram did nothing but believe.

 Faith alone saves. Faith is what our God most desires in us. Oh sure, God wants us to love him, to love others, to be good and godly and helpful people. But those are all things that come after the first thing. And even if you should give your life up for your family or even your enemies; and even if you give all your money to charity, and donated blood every two months and whatever else, but do not believe in Jesus, it is all worthless. Because what God wants even more than your obedience is your trust, your faith.

 Faith alone saves. And faith alone makes us want to thank God for no other reason than to thank him for all his sure promises. Amen.

1. adapted from Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent,* Appendix B [↑](#footnote-ref-1)