

Sermon for August 11, 2013 – 12th Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 15:1-6

Theme: Don't be afraid. Believe in the LORD! He is your shield and great reward!

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward." ² But Abram said, "Lord GOD, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" ³ Then Abram said, "Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!" ⁴ And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir." ⁵ Then He brought him outside and said, "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." ⁶ And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.

It was a hard fought battle. Against greater numbers, this soldier led his men into battle in order to rescue a relative. When the dust all settled, the soldier and his men stood victorious. The rescued hailed him as a hero. His family showered him with hugs and kisses. A famous church leader blessed him. It was all over and he should have felt happy and secure.

But he felt afraid. Death surrounded him in that battle. Sword, spear and arrows whizzed past him. What if he had died - would God have accepted him into heaven? Would there have been a Savior who would forgive all his sins?

We can sympathize with this soldier's fears, can't we? Think about the sudden storms this past week. What if the winds that knocked down the Maribel Hotel and ripped the roof off of the Heritage Farm had hit your house? What if a tree had landed in your bedroom or a tornado sucked you up together with your roof - would you have been prepared to die? And what about the future? As you hear news reports about all the crime and catastrophe happening in the world, don't you ask the question: "Where is God?" Why all the pain and suffering? Is he coming again soon? Will he keep his promise to protect us and save us?

Yes God will - and our sermon text assures us of this truth. **Don't be afraid. Believe in the LORD! He is your shield and great reward!**

If you haven't guessed it yet, the unnamed soldier I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon is Abram, whom God would later rename Abraham. The situation I described is pretty much the situation we find Abram in at the beginning of our text. Genesis 14 describes how 4 kings waged war against Sodom and Gomorrah, won and took the people of that area captive (including Lot and his family).

On hearing the news of Lot's capture, Abram went out with a band of 318 servants, and the servants of two allies, attacked the 4 kings during a night raid and rescued Lot. Melchizedek – the great priest of God Most High – blessed Abram; reminding him that the LORD had given him the victory. There was reason to be happy, but Abram was afraid – and God knew why.

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not be afraid, Abram."

What a God we have – a God who already addresses our fears and problems even before we had a chance to voice them. You all have experienced this, haven't you? Maybe it was a sermon or devotion that struck home, that seemed like it was written just for you; even though no one knew what you were feeling. Was this mere coincidence? No, it was a loving God coming to you through his Word. The Holy Spirit knows what is in our hearts and he is a master at applying the Word we need to hear.

And when the LORD comes to the troubled believer, we can almost always summarize His message as: "Don't be afraid. I am with you. I love you. Hush, child. I know your hurt. I see its cause. I am here to hold you. I am here to forgive and comfort you. I will walk with you through the difficulty you are facing. Learn from me. Follow me and I will bring you home. Don't be afraid. I am your Savior. I am your God."

The LORD knew what was on Abram's mind. This is why He says: "*Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.*"

The LORD reminded Abram of his calling and promise. The LORD had chosen Abram in the land of Ur and sent him on a journey to Canaan. He promised that He would be Abram's God and, throughout Abram's life the LORD kept this promise. He protected him. The LORD promised Abram a son and, through the offspring of this son, a Savior. All Abram had to do was trust.

And, just like a mother's caring words might open the floodgates of emotion from a struggling teen, so also the LORD's timely comfort broke the dam that held back the fear Abram felt in his heart.

Lord GOD, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?"
³ *Then Abram said, "Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!"*

At first glance it might seem as if Abram was worried about the fact that he was childless. Now I certainly do not want to minimize the emotional pain couples face, who are unable to have children. It is real and heartbreaking. But Abram's worries lay further than this. God not only promised Abram a child, but that this child would become the ancestor of the Savior. Years have passed since God made this promise. Abram is well into his 80's and he just came back from battle. Abram could die at any moment; and if He died, what would happen to the promise? Sure, Eliezer would get Abram's property, but what about the Messiah? What could God give Abram, if He didn't have the Messiah? This is what caused Abram the most trouble!

How did the LORD address this problem, this doubt that was starting to arise in Abram's mind? He reminds Abram of His promise. *And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir."* ⁵ *Then He brought him outside and said, "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be."*

After reiterating the promise, the LORD shows Abram the starry sky. Even though the LORD doesn't say it, one wonders if this act didn't remind Abram that the LORD created all those stars. He is all-powerful. God simply spoke the word and they all came into being. If God's Word can accomplish that, then He certainly can accomplish what He promised Abram: that he would have a son, and through a special offspring in the future, his descendants would be as countless as the stars in the sky.

Did you know that God encourages us the same way He encouraged Abram? No, God doesn't speak to us in visions, but He does speak to us in His Word. When we are afraid, the LORD reminds us of his promise to protect us. If we feel guilty beyond forgiveness, the LORD reminds us of his promise to forgive. If we face an uncertain future, the LORD reminds us of the certainty of his love and the heaven that awaits us. And after reminding us of His promises, he then reminds us His past faithfulness, how he has never failed to keep a promise in the past, nor will he fail to do so in the future. He does all this in his Word and Sacraments.

What effect did this reassurance have on Abram? We read that Abram *believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.*

Abram took God at his Word. Some way and some how, the LORD would give him a son, and this son would have children and grand children . . . and at some point in the future, the one promised seed would come, the one who would crush the serpent's head, the one through whom all nations would be blessed. Abram believe in this promise. He looked forward to the Messiah, and God accounted this faith to him for righteousness.

But what exactly does this mean – that God accounted this faith to him for righteousness? Righteousness is basically sinlessness. In order to dwell with God we need to be righteous. Sadly, there is not a single person on this earth – except Jesus – who is sinless. So how can we be saved? Through Jesus' work of redemption. God sent his Son into the world to live the perfect life we all failed to live. He sent his Son into the world to die for our sins, so that whoever believes in him, would have eternal life.

But what does it mean to believe in the LORD? Former Seminary Professor John Jeske put it this way: *To believe God, then, is more than to trust his power. To believe God is to trust his promise, to take him at his word, to throw oneself on his mercy. God considers this trust as meeting his demands for perfection.*” Martin Luther says: *“Righteousness is nothing else than believing God when He makes a promise”*

Abram believed in the LORD. He trusted all His promises. And did the LORD fulfill them? Absolutely, yes. Abraham and Sarah went on to have a son, Isaac. Isaac had a son: Jacob, whom God renamed Israel. Eventually this family line grew into a nation, and from this nation Jesus, the Messiah, was born.

But that was not the end of the promise. You see, the LORD said that Abram would have countless descendants, that he would be the father of many nations, and that all people would be blessed through his promised descendant. Did all this happen? Consider the following: Jesus died for the sins of the whole world. He is the Savior of the nations. Consider also what the Holy Spirit inspired St. Paul to write in his letter to the Galatians: ⁷ *Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham.* ⁸ *And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, “In you all the nations shall be blessed.”* ⁹ *So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham. (Gal 3:7-9 NKJV)*

And how many are those who believe like Abraham, and are considered his children? In the book of Revelation, the LORD gives us a glimpse of heaven. ⁹ *After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands,* ¹⁰ *and crying out with a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Rev 7:9-10 NKJV)*

Brothers and sisters in Christ: here you have the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abram, recorded in our text. We, who look to Jesus in repentance and faith, are the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abram – that he would have descendants as countless as the stars in the heavens.

Fellow believer in Christ: is the devil plaguing you with doubts? Is your weak human flesh tempting you to fear? Are you wondering if God is with you, if he loves you and will protect you? Are you wondering if he will forgive you and give you the eternal life he promises? Go to the Scriptures and hear him say to you: Don’t be afraid. Believe in me, your LORD! *I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.*” Amen.