

In our reading from Genesis, we get one of the great lines in the Old Testament: “And he believed the Lord, and He counted it to him as righteousness.” It is both simple and profound, like other memorable verses such as John 3:16 or Ephesians 2:8-9. Believe the Lord, be counted righteous. As we consider how this took place in Abraham’s life, we can then apply these simple, profound words in our own lives as God’s people today.

So what is it that Abraham – or still Abram, at this point – believed? Years before, the Lord had called to Abram, telling him to leave his land and relatives and even his old gods and go to a new land, one that the Lord would show him when he got there. It would be a hard thing, leaving behind everything familiar.

But the Lord had chosen Abram for a great purpose, and He gave Abram a promise: “And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

There’s a lot tied up in these words of promise. God will bless Abram, make his name – his reputation and identity – great. He will protect Abram from those who would do him harm. And especially, the Lord promises to make Abram’s descendants a great nation, and that through Abram all the families of the earth would be blessed.

Right there, that promise concerning all the families of the earth is a universal promise, one speaking of all people. God has given such a promise before, in the Garden of Eden, actually. It’s the promise of the Savior, one to come and deliver man from the curse that is on all men, the curse of sin and death. The Lord is promising that the Messiah will come from Abram.

So Abram sets off. And true to His word, the Lord blesses him. He increases Abram’s wealth and possessions, to the point that Abram and his nephew Lot have to split up. He protects Abram in battle when Abram fights against four kings in order to rescue Lot. He blesses Abram through His faithful priest, Melchizedek. In all of Abram’s travels, the Lord is with him. And yet, after many years, there’s still a part of the promise that is missing.

Speaking with the Lord in a vision, Abram asks God, “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless?” Does this mean that Abram is ungrateful for all that God has given him? Not at all! But Abram is realizing that the greatest part of God’s promise, the blessing for all people, is still unfulfilled.

How can he become a great nation when his heir isn’t even related to him? How can he bless all the families of the earth when his own family has no child? Abram has been waiting and waiting, and yet far from seeing the fulfillment of this great promise, he hasn’t even been able to see the beginning.

The Lord hears Abram's lament. And what does He do? Does He grant the fulfillment then and there? No. The Lord does this: "And He brought him outside and said, 'Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.' Then He said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.'"

The Lord responds to Abram's concerns about His promise by further telling Abram about the promise! Abram is worried that he doesn't have a child, and God answers by giving Abram His word of promise, that Abram's offspring will be like the innumerable stars of heaven.

We might wonder what good this would do. What help could it be if a person is doubting a promise, to give more promises? Wouldn't it be better to just fulfill the promise, to cause Abram and Sarai to have a child right away? That would make sense to our human reason. But we see here that God works differently – and much better – than us.

In response to doubt, God gives His word, and through that word He grants faith. Abram hears that promise of God, and by the working of the Holy Spirit, believes in it. He has faith, trusting that God is faithful, that God will keep His promise and will do it when He knows is best. Abram believes that the promised offspring is coming to save him and all the families of the earth. And through that gift of faith, Abram is counted as righteous. He believes, and he is saved.

We today are blessed to know how the fulfillment of that word took place. We know that it came in Jesus Christ. Jesus was, through his mother Mary, the physical descendant of Abram. But Jesus was also the Son of God and Himself fully God, being begotten from the substance of His Father from all eternity. That's something that Abram, and all people, must grasp by faith.

Another aspect of the fulfillment not apparent to Abram was what exactly the Lord would do to bless all people through his offspring. Abram was familiar with the blessings of the Lord, having received many himself. But how, in what way, the Lord would grant this blessing to others, Abram couldn't know. He didn't know that it would be through the sacrifice of that Offspring that the sins of the world would be taken away – the greatest blessing imaginable. Abram would get a glimpse of this when he was told to sacrifice his son, Isaac, but even that wasn't fully understood by him at the time.

Likewise, Abram didn't know how people would be made his children. Physical descent would make sense, but is totally insufficient. And the Bible makes it clear that this isn't how the blessing comes about. Being a child of Abraham has nothing to do with having some of his DNA in your body somewhere. Jesus makes this clear in John 8, where He states that, regardless of the Jews' genealogy, because they have refused to believe in Him, they are not children of Abraham, but of the devil.

Likewise, St. Paul writes to the Galatians and says, "Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham." And remember, Paul has all the qualifications of the Old Covenant: an Israelite of Benjamin, circumcised on the eighth day, a Pharisee and expert in the Law. But what does he say about all that? "For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the

law, but that which comes through faith in Christ.” The apostle points out that he is counted as righteous for the same reason that Abram was: believing in the promise of Christ.

As those who are children of Abraham through faith, he then serves as a wonderful example for us to follow. Like him, we too have been given many wonderful promises from God. He has promised to provide for our earthly needs and protect us from danger, being our shield, as He told Abram. He has promised to lead us in the way we should go, and also that He will be with us every single step of the way. And especially, the Lord has promised us that He has taken away our sins, given us new lives in Holy Baptism, and prepared a place for us in the halls of heaven, where we will dwell with Him forever.

These are wonderful promises, and like Abram, we do get to experience many of the blessings in this life. The reason that you are and I here this morning is because God has kept His promise to protect and provide for us. That we have had food for our bodies to keep us alive, and clothes to cover us, and this building in which to worship, and the freedom to gather publicly without fear of government persecution, and that we all made it safely here – all these things and countless more are blessings from the Father of lights.

And yet, as we receive those blessings with thanksgiving, we also long for the fulfillment of the promise received in our Baptism. We have been cleansed from sin, and yet we still struggle with sin, longing to be free from temptation. We have been given rooms in the Father’s house, but we’re still living in this world that is corrupted and broken by sin. Our Lord has conquered death at the cross and showed forth His victory at the empty tomb, and yet we still gather at the graves of our loved ones, knowing that someday we too will be laid to rest. We are like Abram, having received many blessings, but still longing for the complete fulfillment of God’s promises.

Our Lord knows our struggles and our longing, just as He did for Abram. And like Abram, He does grant us comfort. This comfort doesn’t come through immediate fulfillment, but, as it did for Abram, through the promises of God. The Bible is so full of these that trying to find them all would be like trying to number the stars – you’ll always find more!

When we worry about the things of this life and our bodily needs, we have the words of Jesus: “Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God... Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows.”

When we are confronted by temptations that seem overwhelming, our Lord – who was tempted as we are – reassures us through His word: “God is faithful, and He will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation He will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”

When we feel lost and alone in the world, God speaks through the Psalms: “Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory.”

When we worry about what the future holds, we hear, “In your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.”

When we mourn the death of those who died believing in Jesus, we are blessed to hear the words of Jesus spoken to those whom He loves: “Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.” Over and over, the Lord gives us words of comfort, peace, and hope.

As we hear these words, God the Holy Spirit comes and allows us to believe them. God’s promise to Abram seemed impossible, and yet through the Spirit’s gift of faith, he believed. The Spirit is there, letting you believe that the words of Scripture aren’t just collections of history and poetry and ethics, but the very word of God, spoken to you and to all. The Bible is God revealing himself to you, that you might have comfort and joy in Him.

Abram only ever got to see one son of the promise: Isaac. And yet by faith, he did see the fullness of the promise. As Jesus said, Abraham did see His day and was glad. In this life, we see only some of the fulfillment of God’s word. The Bible tells us, “For now we see in a mirror dimly.” But the day is coming when we shall see face to face. We will be gathered with all the faithful, all those sons of Abraham, more numerous than the stars, shining with the splendor of God Himself.

That is the promise that our Lord has given, and His word cannot fail.

In the name of Jesus, amen.