

TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Genesis 15:1-6

Amen Faith

When we read the Scriptures, we read the lives of real people, people like you and me. There are great saints in Scripture, men and women who gave their lives in service to the Lord, who trusted in Him when their every human inclination and instinct told them not to. There are also great sinners in Scripture, scandalous men and women: adulterers, murderers, traitors, liars, etc. But we need to make one thing clear. These are not different people, but one and the same. These are sinner/saints, who one moment take the most courageous stands of faith and the next are swallowed by temptation and despair. These are people like us.

Today, as we look at one of those men, I want you to remember what comes before and after this chapter of Scripture. In chapter 14 of Genesis, Abraham had defeated an army that had vastly outnumbered him and which was much better trained. He had rescued his nephew Lot, and, because he knew the victory was from God and not men, he had refused to keep any of the captured treasure or to accept gifts from those he saved. One verse later, as chapter 15 begins, we see Abraham doubting God's promise of a son from chapter 12. After God repeats His promise to Abraham in our lesson today and makes a covenant with Him, it takes Abraham only a few more verses before we find him taking God's job into his own hands and conceiving a son with Hagar, his wife's servant. What trust! What doubt! What renewal! What backsliding! And this is a man who is in the faith hall of fame of Scripture in our second lesson, from Hebrews 11.

Luther provides some excellent insight into Abraham. Luther too was a great man of faith who also freely admitted that at times he was overwhelmed by temptations and doubts, and could smell the very fires of hell. In fact, Luther had a word for these trials that often followed the greatest moments of faith-filled action, and the word was *Anfechtung*, a word that no one has ever been able to translate satisfactorily into English, but a word that many of us English-speakers have nevertheless experienced. Luther writes on these verses:

Therefore it is very profitable to consider these examples, namely, that the saints who are bold in the Holy Spirit are bolder than Satan himself. On the other hand, when they are in the clutches of a trial, they tremble so much that they are afraid even of a rustling leaf. We are reminded of our weakness in order that no matter how great the gifts are that we possess, we may not exalt ourselves but may remain humble and fear God. (AE 3, p. 8)

And further:

God makes His saints sad again after they have been gladdened, lest they become proud and smug; that after they have been made alive, He leads them down to hell, in order that He may lead them back from there. (ibid., p. 9)

Abraham rode that rollercoaster of faith in our text. First, he accused God. He says, "What are you going to give me? You haven't given me the one thing you promised me and that I want. Why should I trust anything you say?" Sure, he didn't use those exact words, but he might as well have. Here is the father of many nations whining like a child who didn't get its ice cream cone after the little league game. But notice what God does. He lets Abraham whine, and then He takes him by the hand and shows Him that His promise is still good.

We have all accused God at some time or another. We have been upset with how we look. We have been ungrateful for the car we drive or the clothes we wear to school. We have pinned the blame for the consequences of our sin on the Law-giver, and not on ourselves, the law-breakers. We have been jealous of those with better health or greater gifts. In all this, we have accused God of being less than what He claims to be: God. And God, therefore, sometimes has to take us by the hand, lead us to His Word, and show us that His promise is still good. It is the same promise He gave to Abraham. It is the

promise of a Son who was born to keep a promise, a promise that the serpent's head would be crushed, death destroyed, and sin forgiven. And where we have God's promise, there we have faith.

When Abraham heard God repeat His promise, and elaborate on it, he believed. The Hebrew says "he amened God." That is what amen means: "to believe or confirm." "Amen" is faith's reply to God's promise. It says, "Yes, it shall be so." Because it is faith's reply to God's promise, and because it is a confirmation of what God has said, "amen" can only be found where the promise is first supplied. There is no "amen" to a whim or a wish; but to a promise, faith shouts it from the rooftops. We pray, "Lord, give me a Lexus, if it be your will." We pray, "Give us this day our daily bread. Amen." We pray, "Lord, let me have this promotion, if it be your will." We pray, "Lord, forgive me for the sake of your Son. Amen." Where there is a promise, there is faith. Where there is no promise, there is no faith, but a wish.

Notice the extent to which God goes to make His promise clear to Abraham. He shows him the stars and tells them to count them. Just after our lesson, He appears to Abraham in a vision and makes a covenant with Him in a very visible and physical way. Growing up in Detroit, counting the stars never seemed like a difficult task. We could only see a few of them. The other night, however, as I walked outside here in beautiful Shields, the task seemed impossible, as it must have also seemed for Abraham. It is impossible to comprehend the awesomeness of God's promise. It is impossible to fit God Almighty in our tiny heads. It is impossible to predict how God will do what He says He will do, but it is not impossible to trust that He will do it. No, "amen" is one four-letter word the Christian can easily and always say without shame.

Just as He did with Abraham, God goes to great lengths to make His promise clear to us. He comes to us in a very real and physical way. He shocks a baby into tears with the waters of its salvation. He jolts the confirmand communing for the first time as He warms his or her belly and jolts their taste buds with His Blood, in, with, and under, pungent wine. He reassures the troubled soul of the penitent as He bids forgiveness through the lips of a simple sinner who is also their pastor. He has written exactly what we need to read in our darkest hour on the pages of a book found next to fiction on the shelves of secular bookstores. He hangs the same stars in the sky still today and reminds you that the One who hung them all is the One who will never forget His promise.

When the LORD says, "So shall your offspring be," the Hebrew word for "will be" is the same as the Hebrew word for the name of the LORD. The LORD God of Israel, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is the God of "will be," not of "might be," "shoul'da been," or "coulda been." He is the God of promise, and the God who creates faith in that promise through the work of the Holy Spirit. When Abraham believed God, it was "credited to him as righteousness." It was not righteousness Abraham already had. It was credited to him. It was accounted to him. It was reckoned to him. It was reputed to him. It was something that was God's that was then transferred also to him. It was something that Abraham was not that God made him to be. It was grace, received through Abraham's faith, rooted in the promised Seed who would make Abraham's inheritance of the ultimate Promised Land possible. God did not point Abraham to something in himself. God did not tell Abraham to do something, to say a prayer or to light a candle. God simply declared Abraham righteous. And, in Christ, He has declared you righteous as well.

The God of "will be," of promise, of accomplishing the impossible, has made promises to you as well—promises of grace and mercy. There are no grounds to accuse Him. There are no reasons to doubt. There is nowhere to look, but to the promise, constantly repeated and reaffirmed through Word and Sacrament. You have received God's promise by faith, weak though that faith may be at times. This faith has been credited to you as righteousness, because it clings to the Righteous One, Jesus Christ. Now, speak and live faith's "amen." Know that what He has said, He will do. Know that all He does, He does for you. I know sometimes it doesn't seem that way, but then go count the stars, and when you've totaled the tally, then you can worry about telling God how to keep His promise. Amen.