

Sermon for March 8, 2019 – Lent 2

Genesis 12:1-8 (Evangelical Heritage Version)

Theme: God’s Promises Move us to:

- 1) *Take His Word to Heart,*
- 2) *Act on His Promised Grace,*
- 3) *Persevere in all hope.*

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Get out of your country and away from your relatives and from your father’s house and go to the land that I will show you. ²I will make you a great nation. I will bless you and make your name great. You will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse anyone who dishonors you. All of the families of the earth will be blessed in you.” ⁴So Abram went, as the LORD had told him. Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. ⁵Abram took Sarai his wife, Lot his brother’s son, and all the possessions they had accumulated and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to travel to the land of Canaan. Eventually they arrived in the land of Canaan. ⁶Abram passed through the land until he came to the Oak of Moreh at the place called Shechem. The Canaanites were in the land at that time. ⁷The LORD appeared to Abram and said, “I will give this land to your descendants.” Abram built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him. ⁸He moved on from there to the hill country east of Bethel and pitched his tent there, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and proclaimed the name of the LORD.

I need a volunteer from the congregation, preferably a child, who is willing to fall backwards. Do I have any takers? How about if I promise to catch you? What if I promise to give you this Toonie for helping me?

(Address the person who comes up) So, what made you decide to do what I asked? Was it the fact that I asked you to do something strange, or that I promised to catch and reward you? It was the promise, wasn’t it? You acted on the promise.

Now, if my puny promised Toonie moved you to boldly fall back – trusting in my other promise to catch you - imagine what God’s promises can move us to do! Actually, that’s exactly what we are going to talk about in today’s sermon, under the theme: **God’s Promises Move us to:** 1) Take His Word to Heart, 2) Act on His Promised Grace, 3) Persevere in all hope.

Part One: Take His Word to Heart

Have you ever heard of Abraham? Sure you have! The Bible calls him the father of all who believe.ⁱ But did you know that Abraham didn’t always believe in the LORD? He actually grew up in a family that worshiped idols!ⁱⁱ

But the LORD loved Abraham. He didn't want him to die as an unbeliever. So, what did God do? He appeared to him (while he was still known as Abram) and asked Abram to follow him. Guess how Abram responded? He trusted the LORD – so much so that he left his homeland of Ur (which is in modern day Iraq) and travelled hundreds of miles with his extended family to a place called Haran (located on the southern border of modern day Turkey).ⁱⁱⁱ

Abram and his family made a life for themselves in Haran; but after his father died, the LORD appeared to Abram a second time and said to him: “*Get out of your country and away from your relatives and from your father's house and go to the land that I will show you.*”

Can you imagine how difficult this must have been for Abram? Yes, he had done it before - but now he was old: 75 years old to be exact. On top of this, Abram was not only told to leave his country and people, but his extended family as well! Can you imagine how difficult that would have been?

Actually, I believe you can imagine it because, in a certain way, we are all like Abram. We were all born in unbelief and sin. None of us knew the true God until he made himself known to us. And how did he do that? For some of us the Spirit of the LORD came to us when we were infants through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, and he created faith in our hearts. For others it happened later in life, as the Holy Spirit spoke to us through his Word, moving us to repent of our sins and believe in him. Regardless of when and how it happened, the same LORD who called Abram to faith has called us as well.

And, just as the LORD asked Abram to leave his country, people and family to follow him to an unknown promised land, so also, in a spiritual sense, the LORD asks us to do the same. God's Word calls us to abandon all worldly lusts and passions^{iv} - turning away from the godless culture we live in to follow him in repentance and faith.^v Yes, the LORD even bids us to love him more than our own families. In other words, if a close family member ever tried to separate us from the LORD, we would willingly sacrifice their love in order to remain faithful to Christ.^{vi}

But this is hard and scary for us to do! What will move us to such action? The same thing that moved Abram: God's wonderful promises.

The LORD said to Abram: *²I will make you a great nation. I will bless you and make your name great. You will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse anyone who dishonors you. All of the families of the earth will be blessed in you.*”

The LORD definitely promised Abram wonderful things. He, who was childless, would have descendants too numerous to count! He, who was not well known in the age he lived, would be famous throughout time. God would give Abram so much, that he would be able to help others in need. The LORD would certainly watch over Abram.

Yes, these were all wonderful blessings, but the best was the last: *All of the families of the earth will be blessed in you.*” And why would that be? Because one of Abram's descendants would be the Savior that God promised Adam and Eve after they fell into sin. This Savior would live the perfect life in obedience to God's law that we all have failed to live – winning the righteousness

we need to stand before him. Having won this righteousness, this promised Savior would take all the sins of mankind upon himself and pay for them in full. How? By suffering and dying for them on the cross. He would rise from the dead – showing that all sin has been forgiven for all people. This, then, is how all families of the world would be blessed in Abram: one of his descendants, who we know by the name of Jesus, would be “*the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*”^{vii}

As the LORD made wonderful promises to Abram, so he has made wonderful promises to you. Through the Gospel the LORD calls you to follow him in faith – promising to forgive your sins in Christ, bless you with daily bread, watch over your life, allow you to be a blessing to others and – best of all – allow you to inherit the promised land of heaven. Yes, the LORD has made some amazing promises: so, what are you going to do with them?

I pray that you do the same thing Abram did and take the LORD’s promises to heart. And how do we know he took them to heart? By the way Abram acted on God’s promised grace.

Part Two: Act on His promised Grace.

We read: ⁴*So Abram went, as the LORD had told him. Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.* ⁵*Abram took Sarai his wife, Lot his brother’s son, and all the possessions they had accumulated and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to travel to the land of Canaan. Eventually they arrived in the land of Canaan.*

I don’t know about you, but I don’t enjoy moving. Even with all our modern conveniences, moving remains a hassle. Abram didn’t have all the conveniences we enjoy. He was old, somewhat established in Haran, had extended family there. . . and yet, at the LORD’s command, he gathered all his belongings and family to travel hundreds of miles by foot to an unknown place. What made him do this? The LORD’s promised grace!

And the LORD’s grace accomplishes the same for us today: to leave the world and its enticements, to boldly follow Christ.

But how do we do that? I mean, sometimes I find myself committing sins I know are wrong and doing things I don’t really want to do.^{viii} Sometimes it seems as if the more I remind myself of God’s commands, the more I find myself sinning – just adding guilt to guilt.^{ix} Why is that? It’s because I fail to remind myself of God’s promised grace!

Brothers and sisters in Christ: do you want to know where you can find the confidence you need to make bold changes in your life? Do you want to know how to overcome the temptations that seem to keep entangling you into sin? You find it in the same place Abram found it: God’s promised grace – as the Scriptures say: *For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people.* ¹²*It trains us to reject ungodliness and worldly lusts and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in this present age.*^x

Yes, God's promised grace alone - his promises to forgive, help and bless us in Christ - give us the power to act in faith like Abram did – motivating us to go against our sinful feelings, and turn away from worldly passions. His promised grace sets our lives on a new path - moving us to persevere in all hope.

Part Three: Persevere in all hope.

We read that, after arriving at the land to which God led him, ⁶*Abram passed through the land until he came to the Oak of Moreh at the place called Shechem. The Canaanites were in the land at that time.*

Abram moved his family based on the promises God made him. Imagine Abram's concern when he came to the land God promised him and found it settled by people more numerous and stronger than he! I can imagine the devil tempted him to give up hope: "Come on, Abram: this land is filled with people. How will the LORD ever give this place to you? Not only that, but you are old. Do you really think God will give you descendants?" Yes, I can imagine the devil tempting Abram with such thoughts. Why? Because I know how he tempts me.

But the LORD didn't want Abram to waver in his faith. For this reason: ⁷*The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "I will give this land to your descendants."* God reiterated his promise: Abram would have descendants and they would indeed inherit the land.

God didn't tell Abram how or when this would happen. Why not? Because he wanted Abram to simply trust him. And that is what God's promises moved him to do, as we read: *Abram built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.* ⁸*He moved on from there to the hill country east of Bethel and pitched his tent there, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and proclaimed the name of the LORD.*

Yes, despite all the seemingly insurmountable obstacles placed in his way, Abram persevered in his hope – trusting that the LORD would faithfully fulfill his promises. This is why Abram seemed to build an altar wherever he moved in the land. Those altars served as a testimony of Abram's faith – that, no matter how things looked, he would trust in the LORD's promises: the greatest of which was the promised Savior, through whom all people on earth would be blessed.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: life is not easy. There will be times when it seems as if God isn't keeping his promises. Maybe you will lose your job and won't seem to have any prospect for further employment. Will God really provide the daily bread you need? Maybe you or a loved one will battle a painful, terminal illness. What about God's promise to deliver us from such evil? Maybe you struggle against an addictive sin like pornography, alcoholism, laziness, being mean or gossiping. Why is the LORD allowing you to face temptations that seem beyond what you can bear?

Our faith life – just like Abram's actual life – will not be easy. But just as God came to Abram, so he comes to us through his Word and Sacraments. He comes to remind us of his promises – encouraging us to persevere in our hope. And, as we look to Christ in repentance and faith, we are

encouraged – so much so that we build our own altars to the LORD. No, we don't build physical altars, but spiritual ones. Wherever we meditate on this Word, call on his name through prayer and tell other people about the hope we have in Jesus, we build a spiritual altar through which the LORD is glorified and our faith is strengthened.

Yes, God's amazing promises certainly move people to do amazing things. Let us, therefore, ever rejoice in them – always taking them to heart, acting on his grace, and persevering in all hope. And why will we do this? Because we know that *the LORD is faithful to all his words and merciful toward all he has made.*^{xi} On him we can always rely. Amen.

ⁱ Cf. Romans 4:16

ⁱⁱ Cf. Joshua 24:2

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. Acts 7:2-4

^{iv} Cf. 1 John 2:15-17

^v Cf. 2 Corinthians 6:15-18

^{vi} Cf. Matthew 10:37

^{vii} John 1:29 EHV

^{viii} Cf. Romans 7:15-23

^{ix} Cf. Romans 7:7-12

^x Titus 2:11-12 EHV

^{xi} Psalm 145:13 EHV