

Sermon – 08/11/19

Text – Hebrews 11:1-16

Theme – “Living While Dying”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Abram was already an old man when God called him out of Haran, to go to the Promised Land. God had commanded Abram to leave his country, his family, his gods, and his old way of life – in order to go to an unspecified land, where God promised that He would make Abram a great nation, with a great name, and that through Abram’s family all the world would be blessed (that is, God promised that the Savior would come from Abram’s line). As unbelievable as it all sounded, Abram took God at His word and he went. With only his immediate family (his wife, Sarai; his nephew Lot and family; and his servants) Abram left everything and everyone he knew behind, trusting only in God’s vague promises.

For month after month, year after year, Abram and his little group trudged through lands they did not own and did not know, living as pilgrims and strangers who had to beg for the very water and grazing land they (and their flocks) needed to survive. Yet they prospered. Those flocks and herds grew. The Canaanites did not harm them. When famine came, God provided for them. They prospered so much, in fact, that the flocks got too big: soon there was not enough water and grass for both Abram’s and Lot’s animals, so that fights broke out between their herdsmen. Abram and Lot agreed to separate, to go their own ways to find adequate resources for their animals. Abram, you see, had become a VERY wealthy and powerful man.

But Abram still had no land to call his own; he still wandered from place to place as a nomadic sheep-herder – he did not possess any of the land that God had promised him. And infinitely worse, Abram still had no son, no child, no heir. If Abram was old when he had left Haran (and he was about 75 at that time), what chance did he have **now** of ever producing offspring? His wife was only about 10 years younger than he, so it was obvious that she could not bear him a son. How could God fulfill His promise? Abram was alive, but he was as good as dead because of his advanced age. As dead as his hopes for the son, who seemed to become more and more an impossibility with each passing day.

And if there was no son, then how could there be a Savior descended from that son? You see, Abram’s desire for a son was not just one of personal want, not just to satisfy his wish for someone to carry on the family name and inherit his vast wealth. No, infinitely more important was Abram’s desire for a Savior, who was promised to come from that as yet non-existent son.

Still, in the face of everything that demanded Abram doubt God – his lack of a permanent home, no land, no child, his own advanced years, the impossibility of his wife ever conceiving and giving birth at her age – despite ALL of that, we are told that Abram **believed** the Lord. And that God credited that faith, that trust in His promises (especially that of a coming Savior) as righteousness. You see, though clearly a dying man because of his age and circumstances, Abram was also a LIVING man because of God’s grace to him.

The writer to the Hebrews reminds us of all this in our Epistle lesson today, when he writes:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen... By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of

promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore, from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore. These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.

Abram, Sarai, their son Isaac – even nephew Lot – they were all living while dying. For that is the way it is for all of God's people. We are alive, and yet also dying. From the moment we are conceived in our mothers' wombs, we begin to die. Oh, it is not always noticeable, but it is true. In the womb, cells divide, the baby forms and grows – but its days are numbered. The infant is born, the child grows and develops – yet it's all just steps on the way to the graveyard. The adolescent matures, but soon he starts to notice the tell-tale signs: the graying, thinning hair; the loss of stamina and strength; the weakened capabilities; slower and more painful steps; daily aches and pains, which only grow more intense and frequent. We are born terminal, under the sentence of death. How long will we last? Only God knows, but in every case, each person born WILL eventually die.

We are dying while living. That is the result of sin. Ever since Adam's sin in Eden, each person born (in fact, all of nature) is winding down, with death and the grave as the inevitable destination. You have inherited Adam's death sentence, along with his sin. And because of that fatal disease, you age, you get sick, you will die. There is no escaping it: sin and death. They go together; where you find one, you will find the other. And because you will die, it is plain that you are infected with sin.

For some of us, that sentence of death is much closer than it is for others. Some of us are well advanced in years, some of us are sick, some of us suffer from the impending death of loved us. Likewise, for some of us, that curse of sin is clearer and more obvious than it is for others: some of us have lived manifestly wicked lives (even by the world's standards); some of us struggle daily with habitual sins (like drugs or alcohol abuse; sexual temptation; hatred; greed; and so on); many of us live in perpetual terror that our secret sins will come out and be exposed to the world. But ALL of us live in the shadow of sin and death. YOU are a sinner; YOU will die. Like old Abram, you are as good as dead, with no way of saving yourself, or of giving yourself healing and life.

But into that horrible, frightening mess comes God. To Abram – old, tired, desperate Abram – living in pagan Haran with his idols and no hope, God came and promised. He promised to make Abram a nation, to give him descendants, to bring forth the Savior of the world from his line. Despite all the evidence that spoke against such promises ever being fulfilled, Abram believed. He trusted God and His mercy. He believed in the coming Son of God, who would also be his Son. And so Abram lived. He lived even while dying. He was forgiven all his sins (for that, after all, is what is meant by the phrase “his faith was credited to him as righteousness”). And in that forgiveness, his life was restored. Not just here and now, but forever. He was made the child of God, an heir of all things.

In the same way God comes to you, to your dying world, with the same promise of forgiveness and life. Yes, you certainly ARE a sinner. Yes, you truly are dying because of it. And yes, you do deserve that fate (as do all of us). But God is love, as St. John tells us. He loves. He loves YOU. And so He has come down from heaven to save you. To live and die for you. To

carry your load of sin. To give you His righteousness and obedience and holiness. To suffer your hell. To rise, so that heaven is open to you. To ascend into heaven, where He now rules and reigns and arranges all things – for your welfare. And to come again, on the Last Day, to bring you into His eternal Kingdom, to rule with Him over all things.

Those are the promises God has made to you. That, though you are a dying sinner, for Jesus' sake He forgives you all your sins. That you are His child and heir. That heaven is your home. That one day YOU will be there, with Abram and Sarah, with all those believe His promises. Forever. Those are truly great and marvelous promises. Promises that seem, at times, to be too wonderful to be true. Especially when we have to struggle in this fallen, sinful, dying world. Just as it must have been for Abram and Sarah, so it is tempting to us to doubt God's promises. It seems impossible: if we are forgiven, then why do we still suffer? If we are God's children, then why does He let Satan attack and harass us? If we have eternal life, why do we have to die?

But God IS faithful. He DOES keep His Word. At baptism, He has washed away all your sins and claimed you as His very own. In that water and Word, you receive all His promises of eternal life. That's why we are encouraged to remember the blessings given us at baptism every day of our lives.

God speaks to you too in His written Word and in the spoken, preached, taught Word. He tells you there again and again and again what He has done – and still is doing – for you. He reminds you of His unending love and grace. He comforts and assures you. He strengthens you and your faith, as the Holy Spirit works through that Word.

And in the Lord's Supper He gives you a pledge, a token, a down-payment of those promises. There you eat and drink the very Body and Blood of Christ! He is here, with you, for you, in you! In the sacrament He forgives you and refreshes you. He brings you to His throne where you join the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. A tiny foretaste of the feast to come – the never-ending feast, the wedding banquet of Christ and His Bride, the Church.

In these Means of Grace, God overcomes sin and death. Yes, the world is still a fallen place. Yes, we still must struggle daily with the consequences of sin – like aging and sickness and death. Yes, we still have trials and sorrows and griefs. But we know these things are only temporary. We know we are alive, even while we are dying. We know that God has for us “*a better country, a heavenly one*” and that “*God is not ashamed to be called our God, for He has prepared for us a city*”.

Like Abram, we believe the Lord and His promises of life – and through that faith, God accounts us as righteous. Not righteous in and of ourselves. But righteous in Christ. For faith takes hold of Him, and so we have peace and assurance and confidence. We know that ***nothing*** is impossible for God. Not giving a 100-year old man and his ancient wife a son. Not overcoming sin and death by dying for us on a cross. Not transforming us from slaves of Satan to God's own dear children and heirs with Him of heaven itself.

As Jesus said in our Gospel lesson: “*Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give YOU the Kingdom.*” It IS yours, simply through faith in Christ Jesus. And through that faith, God credits His righteousness to you. So, while it might appear that you are a dying person wandering through a dying world – you and I know (and God knows!) that we are truly living. In our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.