

Sermon Draft

Text: Genesis 12:1–9

Sermon: “The Gift of Hope”

During the Napoleonic wars, the British general Arthur Wellesley, who would become the Duke of Wellington, often found himself using the British troops he commanded to reduce Spanish towns and villages held by French troops. Once the artillery had broken a section of the wall, the real dirty work began. The first troops through the breach were called the “forlorn hope.” Their chances of survival were extremely low. They advanced through the breach in the wall with the confidence that they would likely be killed.

There’s a big difference between this “forlorn hope,” a hopeless hope really, and the hope against hope. In the hope of Abraham, God tells this different story. He calls Abraham to hope against hope. This is Abraham’s faith. Against hope, he believed a promise that he would be the father of many nations. And so, it is for us. Our hope and Abraham’s comes from a promise.

God made shockingly weighty promises to the patriarchs. He granted to Abraham a whole land and descendants as far as the eye could see. God also promised him that from among those descendants would come the blessing that would redeem the world from the fall and its disastrous effects. All people would be blessed through him! So far, so good. The problem is that God required Abraham and all his posterity to believe those promises. God steadfastly declined to give the fulfillment of his promises in easy, simple, or obvious ways.

In this text, God promised Abraham a homeland of his own and asked him to leave Ur and then Haran to go there. The only drawback was that Abraham wasn't sure where it was exactly, nor did God ever give Abraham the deed to this land he promised to him. He was a sojourner in his own land. Indeed, Abraham only possessed it by the promise, and he owned only a plot in which to be buried with his household at *“the cave of the field of Machpelah east of Mamre (that is, Hebron)”* (Genesis 23:19). The best Abraham could do was burial insurance.

Imagine asking your wife to pull up stakes and leave her home and family like Abram did Sarai. The conversation would go something like this: “Honey, let’s go to live somewhere else.” “Where are we going?” “Oh, I don’t really know.” “Where will our home be?” “I’m not sure.” “What will our home look like?” “Um, we haven’t got one yet, but God has promised us burial insurance. How about that?” Abraham lived to an advanced age and fathered the son of the promise, Isaac, when he was almost a hundred years old. But given what he said to his wife Sarai, it’s a wonder that Abram lived past that conversation.

Still, when God said, “Go,” Abram went, with neither deed nor map, taking Sarai with him. God expected Abram to believe not on the basis of his sight, feeling, deeds, burial insurance, or any other earthly prop. God had spoken his great promises. That was good enough for God, and therefore it was good enough for Abram. God hid and revealed himself at the same time in the Word of promise. It was all there, because the mouth of the Lord had spoken. The theology of the cross is the theology of the Word. He speaks. We believe.

God permitted Abraham to dangle, to live in a darkness so impenetrable that it often frustrated both Abraham and Sarah. They failed to see how God would fulfill his promises to them, and sometimes in cowardice and unbelief they schemed to help God fulfill his promises their way. We know how that worked out! But despite their weakness, God was not about to go back on his promise to Abraham. He required Abraham to trust him and only gave fruition to the promise when it was too late, too impossible, the human situation too hopeless. Abraham, Paul says, ***“believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, ‘So shall your offspring be’”*** (Romans 4:18).

The Word of God always confronted Abraham. He was told of the promise. To know God is to trust the Word of God without any evidence of fulfillment. God saying does all. Abraham preached this to Isaac and Jacob, and Isaac and Jacob preached it to their own households.

Since God never goes back on his promises, they are intended likewise as our support in trouble, because the Word of God abides forever no matter how impenetrably dark our path, no matter how forlorn our hope appears to us.

How could Abraham become father of many nations? He couldn't be the father of one son, let alone many nations. He was a man who was landless, except a burial plot, which reminded of the impermanence of the flesh. Abraham had nowhere that was his own. He lived in God's land only by the permission of pagans. Yet the Word of the Lord in our text was, ***"In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed"*** (Genesis 12:3). How do those things go together?

Human reason will not support this faith and confidence. What reason sees drives it to despair of God's goodness and blessing. It sees sin and weakness. We see broken marriages, children born out of wedlock, and all manner of rebellion against God's order. We see a weak and suffering ministry. We know how the great people in the world live. They have big house, car, and beautiful clothes. They live behind high walls.

They appear to be blessed by God. Surely, they're blessed if they have all these possessions! What makes us think we have the blessing of God? We have neither power, nor the deed to it. But this is exactly why we must trust in God. All he gave to Abraham was a word. Not riches, not a land, not a deed to the promised property, not even hope. So, he against hope believed and had hope.

Much that we believe must be believed against hope. Why should God dwell here in our humble church? He who created heaven and earth and all that is in it. As your pastor, how do I have the authority to forgive sins in Holy Absolution or to give the Supper of the Lord so that in your mouths you receive the body and blood of Christ? Where does my authority to preach, teach, and forgive sins come? Do I have the deed to the church's riches? No, my authority is not from man, but from God. Abraham believed "as he had been told" (Romans 4:18), because it was the Word of the Lord that had spoken to him. The voice of God's promise assures that we are blessed and a blessing to the nations, through the Seed given to Abraham, even Jesus Christ, our Lord.

But you may say, “Ah, that was all for the great man, Abraham. We don’t have the status of someone so exalted. We cannot attain to this status. We would never have those who live behind the walls and drive the fine cars come to our home and eat with us and share the hospitality of our table. How could we expect God to commune here at our table with us in this humble, earthly house built by human hands, as beautiful as it may be?” Yet, like Abraham, our Lord Jesus Christ lived a landless existence. He tells us he has no place to lay his head. But he in his flesh is willing to live here among us. He is willing to give himself to us in the Word and under bread and wine for us Christians to eat and to drink for the forgiveness of sins. His full authority is granted by the promise just as it was to Abraham.

Paul says, “*The words ‘it was counted to [Abraham as righteousness]’ were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also*” (Romans 4:23–24). God wanted us to know this same thing too. God wants us to know that he is willing to come down into our humble homes and this little church.

It was written for us too. God treats us the same as he treated Abraham. Just when reason shows us that all is lost and hopeless, that we are defeated and on the verge of despair, God our Father comes in Christ to show us that he cares for us and has opened his heart to us. The one who raised Christ from the dead has sent Christ to bear our transgressions and to acquit us of our sins through his resurrection from the dead. All this he did for us. This faith believes that we are at the same table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is the God of the living not the dead. If that is so, Abraham is also part of our faithful community. Just as Abraham against all hope had faith and went forward not seeing, so we, too, by the power of God can have a faith that trusts God to reckon us as righteous before him, although we never see it.

What hope against hope do we have? What is not reckoned to us is our transgressions. The apostle Paul says that our transgressions are handed over to Christ Jesus. Does Christ need our sins, our transgressions for himself? Does he desire to know and feel your wickedness and despair?

No, he does not need this for himself. But just as we listen to the hurts and problems of our children, so we have a God who sees and listens to our hurts and problems, our sorrows and sins, our foolishness and wickedness. He listens as only a loving Father can. But he takes on our sin not because he must for his own sake, but for ours. So, Isaiah (53:5) says: ***“He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.”*** These are the blessings God promised to Abraham, a promise given to all the families of the earth . . . and given, therefore, to you.

Lent is a time of hope in the midst of hopelessness. Our heavenly Father sent his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, as possessing nothing and yet blessing all nations by giving himself to death for them. He came not to possess the land but to give himself to those who are journeying with him to the cross. With the promised blessings, we are still going on toward our final home. Even though we have no deed for it, we have hope in it, because God has promised, just as he did to Abraham. Amen