

Sermon Draft

Sermon Draft: Justified by Faith

Text: Romans 4:1–8, 13–17

The Second Sunday in Lent accents the faithfulness of our God, who **“remembers his covenant forever, the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations.”** (Ps 105:8) This faithfulness is demonstrated in God’s dealings with Abraham, who was called to inherit a new land and was given the divine promise that he would be the father of a great nation and the means of God’s blessing to the whole world. (Genesis 12:1–9) The *Epistle* which is our text for this morning (Romans 4:1–8, 13–17) is the apostle’s argument that Abraham was not justified by works but through faith, which was counted to him as righteousness.

The *Gospel* (John 3:1–17) is not about Abraham but one of his descendants, Nicodemus, who comes to Jesus by night. Jesus instructs his nocturnal disciple in a new birth, not of the flesh but of the Spirit.

The Gospel pulls us on toward Calvary as the Lord speaks of his own coming death, as the Son of Man will be lifted up so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. Salvation promised to Abraham and acquired by the suffering and death of God's Son lifted up on the cross is given as a gift to be received by faith alone.

Abraham stands before his Creator with no righteousness of his own in which to boast. By the divine word of promise, he is a new creation called into being by the God who "calls into existence the things that do not exist" (v 17). He knows that "before God there is no righteousness except that of faith" (Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans*, [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988], 171).

Back in the eighteenth century, a mystic by the name of Emmanuel Swedenborg sarcastically described the Lutheran as a man locked up in a dark room pacing back and forth repeating to himself:

"I am justified by faith alone. I am justified by faith alone. I am justified by faith alone." Justification by faith alone, is it really such a big deal? Or is it merely a threadbare mantra chanted with monotony [mə'nät'nē] by those whose ecumenical vision is impaired, making them incapable of seeing the rich vistas of the biblical revelation? After all, we are piously told that there is more than one entrée on the biblical buffet. Well, the apostle Paul asserts that justification by faith alone really is a big deal, a matter of being under curse or blessing, of condemnation or acquittal. Yes, a matter of life or death!

To make his point, the apostle showcases Abraham. Was he accounted righteous, or, to use that old word that we still use down South, "reckoned" righteous, by faith or by works? Here is Abraham, forefather of the Jews according to the flesh. No doubt he is a heroic figure with works sufficient for boasting before men. But not before God, there is no space for boasting there.

The question of justification is quite inescapable for Abraham and for us. If we are not justified by faith, we will seek it elsewhere. Pay attention to the way people speak. Pay attention to our own language. No one wants to be wrong. And we'll muster whatever words we can to declare ourselves, our actions, and our attitudes as right.

Listen to the eulogies delivered at the funerals of unbelievers. Isn't it curious that those who claim not to believe in God are so pressed in the face of death to declare that the life now ended was right and good? They are limp attempts to reckon the deceased as righteous with an appeal to his virtues as a husband and father, his professional accomplishments, his athletic allegiance to The State University, his membership in the Rotary Club, or the like. Good works that might indeed provide something to boast about before the world, but such eulogies are empty absolutions; they do not account righteous before God.

It works well in the obituary, but obituaries never get the dead out of the grave.

Circumcision would not cut it for Abraham. Paul painstakingly makes the case of the chronology of Abraham's faith. Faith was there before circumcision. It is by faith, not the cutting of the flesh, that Abraham is reckoned righteous. Likewise to us, the righteousness that is ours is through faith in Christ Jesus and not by works of the Law.

And what is this faith that justifies? It is trust, not in the works of the Law, which means it is not seeking to judge ourselves righteous by any standard of perfection, including all the sometimes subtle and sometimes not too subtle measuring rods we are tempted to use to make it clear that we are in the right. Faith lets go of all of that . . . puts it to death . . . leaves it all in the garbage, and in its place trusts in God, who justifies the ungodly.

There is perhaps a no more pointed statement of salvation in all of the Holy Scriptures than these words of the apostle: "And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness" (v 5).

This is not faith in faith, for faith has an object outside of itself. It is faith in the promise, not a reliance on works. Paul holds up Abraham as a model, as a prototype of this faith, not because he was circumcised as the father of all who believe, but because he was the ungodly one whose faith was credited to him as righteousness. The blessing later proclaimed by David, "***Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin***" (v 7–8), is true of Abraham.

But we may not end with Abraham, for God who accounted him righteous does the same for you.

As Paul says later on in this chapter, these things were written not for Abraham's sake alone but also for us, for the promise extends through Old Testament history into your hearing right now, for faith comes by hearing and the hearing, not of any word, but the Word of Christ, the word of the cross.

This faith is counted to us as righteousness as we believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus, our Lord, who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

Amen