

August 5, 2007
Pentecost 10

"Faith Begins with God's Call to Grace"

GENESIS 12:1-8

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. ² "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." ⁴ So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. ⁵ He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there. ⁶ Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷ The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him. ⁸ From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD.

I am holding in my hand a stick that is dry and dead. Notice how easily it is broken. If I took this stick and attached it to a green grape vine growing in my yard, nothing would happen. Once the stick is dead it cannot be brought to life again unless a miracle is performed, a miracle that only God could accomplish.

Abraham was like a dead stick when he lived in the Ur of the Chaldees and later in the land of Haran. He lived with family and friends who did not know the true God and did not believe in the plan he had for their lives. Then the Lord called Abraham. He told him about blessings that he had planned for him. This call of God was so powerful it created new life in Abraham and attached him in faith to the future coming Savior that God had promised. If Abraham were with us this morning he would enjoy singing with us, "Amazing grace! How sweet the sound! That saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found. Was blind but now I see."

For the next six weeks we are going to be taking a closer look at the life of Abraham. As we look at how God called Abraham to certain privileged blessings and opportunities we want to realize that we are actually looking into what happened in our own lives. This morning we want to see that faith begins, not because of anything in us, but purely by God's grace and his initiative.

Saving faith is purely a gift of God

Listen again to what the Lord our God did to Abraham. "The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you." The Lord God spoke to Abraham. He told him to leave his country and his people and his family and go to the land. In the Hebrew language the word for leave is actually used

twice here for strong emphasis. The word of the Lord was so powerful it actually caused Abraham to pack up his things, leave his country at the age of 75 and go to a new land. The Lord wanted to take this man, this man who was dead in sin, to a whole new place where he would see blessings and believe in these blessings and live in a kingdom where God's love or amazing grace flooded his life.

Abraham once lived in darkness and unbelief surrounded by family and friends who worshipped false gods. Joshua told the people of Israel as they prepared to enter the Promised Land, "Long ago your fathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and worshipped false gods." The Apostle Paul uses the life of Abraham to prove that we are blessed not because of anything that is good in us. He writes in Romans 4, "If in fact Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about- but not before God. What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed and it was credited to him as righteousness." Abraham had nothing to boast about before God. He was a dead stick destined for the eternal death and punishment.

Maybe I can illustrate this further with a gift. If I hold out this gift to you, you need to stretch out your hand, open it and receive this gift. If you keep your fist clenched or turn your back on me when I give you the gift, you will not receive what is in this package. We are born into this world with a natural hatred for the blessings God has for us. We prefer to think on our own and choose our own path to life that absolutely despises the plan God has for us that means totally trusting in him and not in ourselves. We are born creating idols for ourselves of our own choosing. Ephesians 2 makes this powerful sweeping statement. "All of us lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts." Ephesians 2 also describes this condition as being dead in trespasses and sin.

The August issue National Geographic magazine shows ancient Aztec and Mayan ruins with images of gods on hundreds of stones supposedly put in place to guarantee that the rain god would bless the land with abundant life giving rain for their crops. That is the culture that Abraham lived in for the first 75 years of his life until God called him and changed his heart. That is how you and I were born into this world. Have you ever asked yourself the question, "Why am I not some ancient Aztec who sacrificed a son or daughter to appease some angry God? Why am I not a religious fanatic who straps bombs on his body to serve Allah? Why am I not someone living in Santa Maria who worships the blessings God provides more than God himself? It is not that I am born less dead than someone else. It is only God's grace, God's grace alone that calls me and you to blessings and leads us to trust in them.

The call that came to Abraham offered him a cluster of blessings. "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." Abraham would be the father of a great nation of people. Even though he was 75 years and had no son and his wife was not able to have children, the Lord promised to come through and bless him with a son. The Jewish nation today traces its ancestry to father Abraham. Even more important than physical descendants are all those people whose lives are changed by God's grace and become true children of Abraham, people like you and me. In fact the Lord changed the name of Abram to Abraham. Abram means "father of people" and Abraham means "father of nations."

In this cluster of blessings given to Abraham, one blessing stands out above all the others. The Lord said that all peoples on earth would be blessed through Abraham. Martin Luther said in his excellent lectures on Genesis, "This is a promise which should be written in golden letters and should be extolled in the languages of all people, for it offers eternal treasures." Born into the Jewish nation, the descendants of Abraham, would be a tiny child who was Lord and God from all eternity, a baby with the name of Jesus. This Jewish child grew up in the tiny village of Nazareth and lived the perfect life no other human being on earth could ever live. Where we failed to obey our parents and love people as we should, he loved his parents perfectly and all the people around him. It was this son of Jewish carpenter, Lord and God, who not only walked the land of Palestine living every day to please his heavenly Father perfectly, but also gave the perfect sacrifice for the sin of the world. By a miracle of God's grace Jesus was somehow able to take the sin of the world upon himself, die for the sin, pay for it completely. It is in Jesus the descendant of Abraham that the whole world is blessed with the gift of forgiveness and eternal life. The beauty of that gift is summarized in the words that Jesus spoke to someone who was living without this hope and this blessing in his life. "God so loved the world...." (John 3:16)

Just as the Lord took Abraham and called him from the land of darkness to live in the light of his love, the Lord has called you out of darkness in his marvelous light. He has opened up your eyes to see and your heart to believe in a cluster of blessings that are centered the blessing that was promised to Abraham. Last Sunday my wife and I worshipped at Apostles Lutheran Church in San Jose. Sitting in front of us was the daughter of a woman who once lived in darkness as Abraham did. We were privileged to see the Lord call her into the light and take her home to heaven. Her daughter was there in worship with her daughter, her husband and her son, all people brought out of darkness into the light of his life. 1 Peter says, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." What a blessing it is to be called out of darkness as Abraham was!

And how did Abraham respond to the call? When God calls people into his light, he changes their hearts and immediately they respond by showing love and trust in the God who called them.

Saving faith results in works of love

Notice the love and devotion in the life of Abraham. "So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there." The Lord God who took a dead branch and made it alive, also led this man to express his faith in fruits or works that were pleasing to God. He left as the Lord told him. Usually when people move from one part of the country to another they knew where they are going. Abraham left his homeland trusting in the Lord to guide him to the right place to live with his wife Sara, his nephew Lot and a large number of people who worked for him. How many times have you not been faced with an uncertain future and found yourself saying: "I am going to leave my life in the Lord's hands to lead and direct me and help me with my future." Where ever your steps lead you this week, you are privileged to live your life for the Lord. You are privileged to love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind and all your strength. You are privileged to love other people

even more than you love yourself.

Abraham showed his love for the Lord by the way he gathered his wife, and all his people around him and publicly worshipped the Lord. "Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him. From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD." Abraham built altars to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord. He led his people to call on the Lord in prayer. He used the Lord's name, even though they lived in a heathen Land. The God who has called you out of darkness leads you to worship him as you are doing this morning. He leads you to read his Word and pray to him during the week, and even confess what you believe to the people living in our land who may still be in darkness like the Canaanites who surrounded Abraham. The fruit you bear out of love for Christ is a powerful testimony to the blessing of the Savior who has come into your life. Where ever there is faith there will be evidence by the lives that are lived out love for the Lord.

Today we stand in awe of God's grace that changed the life of Abraham, and we thank God for his grace that has made us alive in Christ. If Abraham were with us he would have enjoyed singing with us, "Amazing grace....." Amen.