

August 12, 2007
Pentecost 11

"Facing Fears with Faith, Righteousness and God's Covenant of Grace"

GENESIS 15

After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." ² But Abram said, "O sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" ³ And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir." ⁴ Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." ⁵ He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars-- if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." ⁶ Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness. ⁷ He also said to him, "I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it." ⁸ But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?" ⁹ So the LORD said to him, "Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon." ¹⁰ Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. ¹¹ Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away. ¹² As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. ¹³ Then the LORD said to him, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. ¹⁴ But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. ¹⁵ You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. ¹⁶ In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure." ¹⁷ When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. ¹⁸ On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates-- ¹⁹ the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, ²⁰ Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, ²¹ Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites."

The Lord told Abraham, "Do not be afraid!" I cannot imagine Abraham being afraid. Here was a man who assembled 300 of his best fighting men and won a major victory over the alliance of five kings who terrorized the people living in the land of Canaan. He sent them running like scared rabbits. With this stunning victory he won the respect of his friends and neighbors. Everything seemed to be going right for Abraham, but still he was afraid. He worried whether God would keep the promise of giving him a son.

What are you afraid of this morning? Like Abraham, you are so blessed. God called you out of darkness and brought you into the light of his love. You know what is going to happen to you when you die. You have meaning and purpose in your life. Yet you still have fears. You may have fears about your deteriorating health, your job situation or the problems with some of your children. You may even have some fears about being accepted when

you start the first day of school.

The Lord our God has a way of quieting our fears with his love, just as he did for Abraham. This morning we want to take a closer look at how the Lord bends down to help Abraham face his greatest fear. The Lord does this by strengthening Abraham's faith, showing him the blessing of righteousness, and then making a covenant of grace with him. As you look at Abraham I pray that you will see how the Lord is doing the same for you in your life.

The Lord strengthens your faith with his word

The Lord loves to overcome our fears by strengthening us in his Word. "After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield and your very great reward.'" God told Abraham, "I am your shield." Numerous times God speaks to us in his Word, especially in the psalms. He tells us that he is our shield, or our rock, or our fortress. We began our worship by singing, "A mighty fortress is our God, A trusty shield and weapon."

After God speaks to him, Abraham is not afraid to open up to the Lord and speak about the concern that burdens him and causes him to lose sleep at night. "O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir." Abraham is not worried about his money and wealth going to his servant. He is more concerned that the Lord has not come through and blessed him with the gift of the son that has been promised. When God speaks to us in his Word, we can boldly speak to the Lord and freely confess our weaknesses and worries to the Lord in prayer. Remember the man who came to Jesus and said, "Lord, I believe, help mine unbelief."

The Lord spoke to Abraham again. "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars-- if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." The Lord speaks so clearly to this man who has doubts and fears. A son will come forth from your own body. It would not be his trusted servant Eliezer who would provide a surrogate son to over the inheritance. To offer further proof the Lord points Abraham to the stars of the sky. Look at all the stars shining in the night sky. That is how many descendants will come from you. Included in these descendants are those sons and daughters in faith in who believe as Abraham did, people shining like stars in the universe, people like you and me.

Last summer my wife and I and three of our children hiked to the top of Cone Peak in Big Sur. There in a level place next to the lookout tower we slept out at night. I woke up about 2:00 AM and was overwhelmed at sight of the stars, especially the Milky Way. I thought of Abraham and how the Lord used the stars to remind him of the miraculous way he would keep his promise. Abraham needed that extra object lesson of the stars at night to strengthen his faith and overcome his fears.

Have you ever noticed how the Lord can speak to you in his Word and provide you with object lessons or clear statements that just totally overwhelm you and strengthen you? Let

me read to you from Isaiah 41:10. "Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you. I will help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." Now let me read it again with an emphasis on the word "I." In addition to the Word of God with its emphasis on God being in control of our lives, we are further blessed with the way God uses our Baptism to strengthen us. Scripture reminds us, "As many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ." God reaches down to us and blesses us daily with our baptism. He also gives us the very body and blood of Jesus in Holy Communion because he knows we have fears and doubts and worries that need a special way for him to come into our lives, just as he came into the life of Abraham.

The Lord blesses you with righteousness

Another way the Lord overcame the fears in the life of Abraham was to direct his attention to Jesus, the future descendant who would bless the whole world. Jesus gives us what we need most, the blessing of righteousness. It says, "Abram believed the Lord, and he credited to him as righteousness." Even though Abraham did not know all the details about Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection the way we do, he believed in this blessing and he received the blessing of righteousness that comes with faith in Christ. This perfection or righteousness in Jesus was credited or transferred to Abraham not as a reward for his faith, but as a gift along with the gift of faith that God has provided him. These gifts of faith and righteousness overcame his fear and doubt.

Maybe I can help illustrate how this blessing of righteousness came into Abraham's life and into your life with this bank card I am holding in my hand. You can take a card like this, put it into the ATM machine, punch in your secret pin number and then push another button to indicate the amount of cash you want. What if you did this, and then received a receipt that said you had over a million dollars in your account? Your first reaction would be to call the bank and tell them some mistake has been made. But what if you had a very rich uncle who had placed into the bank accounts of his nieces and nephews a million dollars each as a free gift without strings attached? That money would be transferred to your account and now it is your very own.

In our gospel reading for today Jesus made the point that there are a lot more valuable things in life than money. The best gift you have in your life this morning is the gift of righteousness that Jesus offers you as a free gift through the free gift of faith that has been given to you. In Romans 4 Paul makes the point that Abraham believed in the impossible. He believed God could give him a son in his old age and could provide him with a descendant who would bless the world with the greatest gift known to the human race, the gift of righteousness. Paul writes, "The words, 'it was credited to him as righteousness were written not for him alone, but also for us, to God will credit righteousness-for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.'"

The debt of sin I accumulate in one lifetime or even one week of life on this earth is enormous. Sin is not just being worse than other people. Sin is falling short of God's glory, God's perfection and God's holiness. I cannot begin to hope I can pay off any part of that debt on my own. That is why both you and I need this gift of righteousness that was given to Abraham and also given to us as a free gift.

Fear disappears or at least becomes minimal when you realize how blessed you are to be covered 24/7 by this beautiful robe of Christ's righteousness. We rejoice with Isaiah who said, "I delight greatly in the Lord, my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with the garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness." Or as we sing in the well known hymn. "Jesus Your blood and righteousness. Your beauty are my glorious dress. In the midst of flaming worlds in these arrayed. With joy shall I lift up my head."

The Lord makes a covenant with you

Abraham is so open with the Lord, so willing to speak to God in prayer as a son speaks to a father he loves and trust, or as you might speak to your best friend about things bothering you. The Lord promises to give Abraham's descendants the land of Canaan, the Promised Land. What does Abraham do with this promise? He asks another question that flows from fear. "How can I know that I will gain possession of it?" He wants more evidence, more proof, more assurance, more faith with less fear. "Lord I believe help my unbelief." Does the Lord tell Abraham, "Abraham I have had enough with your fears and concerns? No, the Lord provides even further evidence that the promise is real. He confirms a covenant of grace with Abraham using a most powerful object less of his undeserved grace and kindness.

God told Abraham to take animals, a heifer, a goat, a ram, a dove and young pigeon. He told him to cut the animals in half opposite each other. In ancient times people would make an agreement by with each other by walking through the parts of the animal that had been cut, even implying that something gruesome and bloody should be done if the covenant is broken. The literal meaning of the Hebrew word for making a covenant is actually "cutting a covenant." Today we sign agreements by placing our names on a document, shaking our hands, giving each other a ring. Both parties agree to do their part to keep the agreement. Perhaps Abraham thought God would do the same for him. Walk with him through the slain animals hand in hand with each agreeing to do his part, Abraham his part, and God his part.

That is not what happened. As the sun sets Abraham falls into a deep sleep. He hears the Lord promise even more blessings in the future and give specific information about being slaves in Egypt and then going to the Promised Land. Then Abraham sees in his dream a smoking fire pot with a blazing torch passing through the pieces of meat. It was God's way of saying, "Abraham I am making a covenant with you and I am going to do everything to provide you with faith and with salvation." That is what grace is. Grace is God doing everything to save us. That wipes away all fear. Amen.