

September 1, 2019
12th Sunday after Pentecost
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
Righteousness by Faith

Genesis 15:1–6 (NIV84)

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.

Dear Friends in Christ,

In a human court, the judge and jury will declare a person to be innocent or guilty based on the facts presented. If all things work like they should, someone who committed a crime will be declared guilty. They stole the money. They damaged the property. They harmed another person. If they did it, they are guilty. But if they did not commit a crime, they should be declared innocent, not guilty. Because human trials are filled with fallible and sinful humans, there can be cases where an innocent person is found to be guilty or a guilty person is allowed to escape justice and declared innocent.

But God is not fallible or sinful. His judgments are always correct. If someone sins against the Lord they will not escape on a technicality. They will not get away with it by having a better lawyer. They are guilty. And if someone is innocent, God will know. Of course, you know the problem. We are not innocent. All have sinned. There is no one who does good, not even one. We are, every one of us, guilty of rebellion against the Holy God. If God looks for righteousness in us, he will find none. But he credits righteousness to those who trust in him. Righteousness is by faith.

In the Lord’s dealings with Abraham, we will examine those two important words in the Bible: Righteousness and Faith. We will also see how the Lord deals with us.

Righteousness

Our first big word is righteousness. This means sinless, holy, perfect, and doing what is right according to God. Listen again to the opening verses of chapter 15 and consider whether Abraham was perfect, sinless and holy?

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Abraham is not righteous here because he doubts God’s promises. He is not fully convinced that the Lord will do what he has said in the past. God promised Abraham many descendants. He promised

Abraham that one of his descendants would be the Savior to bless all nations. But Abraham is ready to adopt his servant, Eliezer, in order to pass on his earthly possessions to someone. He thinks God might not give him any children of his own, much less make him the father of many nations.

The rest of Abraham's life was certainly not righteous before the Lord. Twice he passed off his wife, Sarah, as his sister so kings would not bother him. In the next chapter of Genesis, Abraham will go along with Sarah's plan to give him a son. She suggests ruining God's plan for marriage by having Abraham take her servant, Hagar, as another wife. Abraham does and Ishmael is born. Abraham was far from holy, not even close to perfect and nowhere near righteous if judged on his life.

If our life was recorded on the pages of Holy Scripture, what would it say? Would it tell of the times we questioned God? "How can God let me go through this?" "What can God do to help me?" "Is God really with me or has he abandoned me?" "I guess I'll have to come up with my own plan because God's isn't working for my life."

Would the record of our life tell of the times we directly went against the Lord's clear commands? Some, like Abraham and Sarah have abandoned God's plan for marriage. Some, like Abraham, have lied when it was convenient to accomplish their short term goals. Or maybe our sin is a bit less obvious. Our sinful nature wants us to think a lot of ourselves and to do that we are tempted to put others down in our minds and with our words. So we judge others as less than ourselves when they don't wear the right clothes, don't have the same level of intelligence, or don't have the same economic status as we do. The devil especially works on Christians to look down on others who sin in ways that we think we don't. It makes us feel good to pick out the specks of sin in the eyes of others because we can then forget about the plank in our own eyes. We are like Abraham: far from holy, not even close to perfect and nowhere near righteous if judged on our life.

Only Jesus Christ is righteous based upon his life. Jesus is the only perfect human. Jesus' life is the only life the Father can examine and judge to be without sin and innocent. Jesus never gave up on God's promises. He never took a shortcut. He never rationalized rebellion against his Father. He was righteous in every way.

Abraham needed this kind of righteousness to live with God forever. Each one of us needs this perfect righteousness to live eternally with God. But only Christ has it. Praise be to our God that he gives to sinners what we do not have. He credits sinners with Christ's righteousness. How do we receive this great gift of righteousness? By faith.

Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

Faith

What is Faith. Sometimes faith is describes as having three parts: Knowledge, Assent, and Trust. Abraham had knowledge about the Lord. He knew what the Lord told him about the land and his descendants and the one descendant who would bless all nations. In the portion of God's Word before us this morning, we see some specific promises that the Lord makes to Abraham.

"Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." "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.”

Abraham knows that the Lord promised to protect him, be his shield. He knows that the Lord promised to give him a son. He knows that that Lord has promised to give him an uncountable number of offspring. We know many of the claims in the Word of God. The Bible tells us how God created the world. The Bible tells us that Jesus died on the cross to bear the punishment for sinners. The Bible tells us that Jesus rose from the dead. One can have lots of knowledge about the Bible and not have saving faith. There are biblical scholars who know what the Bible says. They just don't agree with it.

That is the second part of faith, assent. To have faith, one must agree that the knowledge God reveals in his Word is true. Abraham agreed that the promises of God regarding land, descendants and the Savior were true. This is one area where faith is under attack today. People don't believe that the claims in the Bible are true. They deny that God created the world. They deny that Jesus was a real, historical person. They deny that Jesus died and deny that he rose. They claim that the Bible is full of myths and legends and is not a source of true history. People may know what the Bible says but do not agree that it is true. The Sunday School class for youth, 7th-10th grades, will be looking at this very thing for the entire year. They will learn how to defend the truth of the Bible. It is called apologetics, defending the faith. We want all Christians to be able to not only recite the truths of the Scriptures but to agree that these claims are true.

Finally, there is the very essence of faith, trust. The devil has knowledge about the Triune God beyond what we do. The devil assents to the facts he knows about God. But the devil does not trust Jesus. He hates Jesus. Faith is trust in Jesus Christ. Abraham did not yet know the name of his Savior but he trusted that God would keep his promise and deliver him from sin and death through a Savior yet to be born. Abraham's trust was not perfect. He slipped and struggled with doubts and trying to accomplish these promises in sinful ways. But our trust in Christ does not have to be perfect trust to be saving faith.

For faith most of all depends on the object of faith. Imagine being on a bridge that crosses a deep gorge. Someone could tie themselves to the bridge and jump off with complete trust in the kite string they used to keep them from falling. However, the object of their faith was not reliable and will break. But the other person standing on that high bridge may be a bit nervous and have doubts about whether that steel and concrete bridge can hold their 200 lbs. Their weak trust in the bridge will not cause the bridge to fail. It is the object of faith that determines the result.

The object of our trust is Jesus Christ. He is the same yesterday, today and forever. By him were all things made. He faced off against the devil and won. Christ cast out demons and healed diseases. He never sinned. Christ did not turn back when facing the suffering of the cross, but instead endured its shame for sinners. He did not allow death to keep him but rose to life again. Nothing can stop Jesus Christ from saving you.

So when doubts arise, don't look to your faith. Look to Jesus. For if we look to see if our faith is strong enough, we will always be disappointed. But our Savior is always strong enough. If we have done what

is unrighteous, look to Christ who has paid for that sin. Look to Christ who has credited us with his righteousness. Trust that our God looks upon us and judges us just as he looks at his Son and judges him. His sees Christ's righteousness in all who trust in Christ.

As Jesus tells us in our Gospel lesson today: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom." (Luke 12:32)

Amen.