

Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17

“It depends on faith”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

The words, “*Abraham believed and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,*” describe the paradox of faith. Abraham believed without ever being able to see the fulfillment of God’s promise. Faith believes simply because it is God’s promise. Abraham could not have known that he would become “*the father of many nations,*” that his name would today be remembered in every nation and language.

This is why Paul wrote of Abraham in this way. Abraham believed in God’s promise without any other evidence *than it was God’s promise*. Abraham’s faith believed in the infinite possibility of God’s promise, and God reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Yet we are so used to hearing this story that the immense radicality of faith may go unnoticed. We speak of Abraham as if he was almost superhuman, doing something we could never do. Yet Abraham was not made righteous by his own work, understanding, or power, but by the faith given to him in the grace of God’s promise.

Abraham believed in the future that God promised at the beginning of the journey, before journey unfolded. This is faith. He didn’t say to God, “Don’t worry God, I’ll make the nations believe,” or “God, you won’t regret choosing me, I’ll work hard for you.” Rather, Abraham believed in a divine promise that was much larger than himself or his abilities. He could not see into the future but walked trusting God. We can, however, see and glimpse the fulfillment of God’s promise that Abraham could not see, because we, too, know the gift of faith.

Perhaps you have been faced with something in your life that seemed like an enormous leap of a faith. Perhaps it was a move to a place that was unknown to you, wondering, “How is this going to work out? Please lead me, Lord.” Perhaps it was a move to a place far away, with many uncertainties yet to unfold. Perhaps it was a career change or a new job that outstripped your own experience and an awareness of your own abilities. Yet the opportunity came to you through someone who saw in you gifts and promise that you yourself could not yet see, which had not yet been realized in you.

God saw the infinite possibility of faith in Abraham, who believed God’s promise, though its fulfillment remained hidden from him. His departure from a familiar world, setting out on a

journey into the unknown, may have even felt a bit like death, because of what was being left behind. The road that Abraham traveled was from death to life because he trusted God, leaving everything behind, as he lived into his faith in God. Everything depended on the grace and the miracle of faith.

Our human experience and knowledge end where faith in God's grace for us begins. In realizing what we are not, we participate in what God is. God's blessing of many nations depended not upon Abraham's work, but upon God's work of grace in him and in all who have believed after him.

Yet all of us come into God's presence as human beings with strengths and accomplishments, weaknesses and failures, and so the example of Nicodemus is very helpful here. By all standards, Nicodemus was a man of God. He was a Pharisee, a scribe and a teacher; he was a member of the Sanhedrin. His holiness of life and understanding of scripture were beyond doubt and reproach. Nicodemus even appears to have been a man of humility. He did not smugly approach Jesus to argue or rebuke, but to talk with Jesus and learn more, he believed that Jesus was a teacher who had come from God.

We might say that Nicodemus was someone who, like us, was learning to walk by faith in Jesus. Perhaps the nighttime conversation with Jesus remained on his mind. Jesus' words about needing to be "*born from above*" to enter into the kingdom of God may have been the divine spark that began to fan the flame of faith in Nicodemus. Nicodemus would later defend Jesus before the Pharisees (Jn. 7:51), and would help to provide Jesus with an honorable burial (Jn. 19:39).

Yet Nicodemus hesitated before Jesus, saying, "*How can these things be?*" Jesus saw clearly what Nicodemus could not yet see in himself. Jesus said to the teacher: "*Are you a teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?*" Jesus might have been speaking to us. Like Nicodemus, we have spent our lives reading God's word. We know the creeds and the theology of the church. Yet just as Jesus said to Nicodemus, I have a feeling he might say to each of us, "You call yourself a Christian, and yet, you do not understand these things? Everything depends upon faith and the gift of the Spirit."

Faith is the gift and grace of God. It is not my work; faith is God's work in me. To be born from above is to grasp faith as God's gift of grace. In Baptism, through water and the Spirit, we are given new birth as children of God. We are made heirs of God's promise to Abraham, and through Jesus, we are given eternal life. The Spirit blows where it will, fanning the spark of faith in us.

The promise that Jesus told Nicodemus is well-known: “*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.*” It is a promise for all the world. This is the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham that Abraham believed, but could not possibly see. Through faith in Jesus, we have the promise that we will not perish – that though we die, we will live. The paradox of faith is to believe in the unbelievable. Like Abraham, we have set out on a journey believing the promise, but without being able to see the fulfillment of the promise.

I remember being told as a teenager, “Put your name in there, where it says, ‘For God so loved the world,’ say your name instead of world.” At the time, it seemed like a novel insight, but in reality, it destroys the power of the promise. The promise is not just for me, but for all the world that God so loves. It is for everyone who believes in him – for all nations and peoples. This includes people I love and care about, people I will never know, and people I may not enjoy being around. The promise includes everyone who has lived before me, and all who will live after me. Everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

Being open to God’s promise for the world means that we are also to love this world as God loves this world. This means we are to see that the promise made to me is also the same promise of grace made to my neighbor. In God’s promise, my neighbor’s life and welfare are tied together with mine.

If God sent Jesus not to condemn the world, then I too, must so live as not to condemn my neighbor in this world. God’s promise to the world in Jesus binds me to my neighbor in God’s love for this world. I cannot say that I love the God who I have not seen, and not care for my neighbor who I have seen.

God has promised you and your neighbor eternal life in Jesus’ name. Believe in God’s promise of love for this world, and live with love for your neighbor. Your life is tied to God’s promise of love for your neighbor.

The promise of eternal life depends on faith. Jesus lives in you through faith so that God’s love for this world might be seen in your love for your neighbor. Amen.