

August 7, 2022

The 9th Sunday after Pentecost

The Lessons: Genesis 15:1-6
 Psalm 33:12-22
 Hebrews 11:1-16
 Luke 12:22-34

The Hymns: # 914 *Light of Light, O Sole-Begotten*
 # 667 *Saints, See the Cloud of Witnesses*
 # 921 *On What Has Now Been Sown*

The Collect: Almighty and merciful God, it is by Your grace that we live as Your people who offer acceptable service. Grant that we may walk by faith, and not by sight, in the way that leads to eternal life; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Sermon:
 "Living by Faith"
 Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1)

Dear Friends in Christ,

I. Abraham & Sarah

Our reading begins with Abraham:

“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.” (Heb. 11:8-10)

Today we consider the faith of Abraham. Abraham is called by God to leave his hometown-and everything else he knows -- and travel roughly a thousand miles (by camel or foot!) to a place he's never seen before. This, says God, will be Abraham's new home; it will be his Promised Land, where his descendants will live and prosper.

God speaks. Abraham packs and leaves by faith in the word that he has heard.

But the faith of Abraham regarding the Promised Land doesn't end there. Abraham arrives in Canaan, faithfully believing that this land is a gift from God to him and to his descendants. This, too, is a matter of faith: God knows this is the plan, and Abraham knows this is the plan, but nobody else in Canaan is aware that a new landlord has arrived. Abraham is there, yet other kings rule their cities and regions. It is Abraham's property now, but there will be no City of Abraham constructed; he will live in tents all of his life, like a wandering nomad who squats on somebody else's property for a

while. He will never see the kingdom of David or the glorious city of Jerusalem, nor will his sons: Isaac and Jacob will similarly live in tents on the land they've inherited. Jacob will eventually go down to Egypt to escape famine, and Abraham's descendants will have no presence in Canaan for the next 500 years or so.

So, there dwells Abraham in his land, the land of Canaan. Nobody else believes or accepts that the land belongs to him, so they go about their lives and their dealings with him as if he's nobody special, just another somewhat prosperous man camped out in the hill country. No respect for Abraham from the world; but all the same, Abraham knows that this is his inheritance, even if no one else believes it. He knows because God says so. God has given His Word, and Abraham trusts that this hoped for, unrecognized inheritance is his.

Even though the world sees him as a passerby in his own home, in the end it doesn't matter. Abraham really is only passing through; and as nice as Canaan is, he awaits the city which has foundations; his destination is the kingdom of heaven. "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." (Heb. 11:1)

Our text continues:

"By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised. Therefore, from one man, and him as good as dead, were born as many as the stars of the sky in multitude -- innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore." (Heb. 11:11-12)

Consider the faith of Sarah, ninety years old and childless. In those days especially children are the crown of a wife, and barrenness the ultimate curse and shame. Sarah has no children, and it's not Abraham's deficiency; he's fathered Ishmael with Hagar. No, the curse is squarely on her shoulders; and at ninety years old, it is one she will take to her grave.

But God speaks, declaring that Sarah will bear a son (Gen. 18:10). She laughs-perhaps with joy, perhaps because the thought is so ludicrous. She laughs, but she believes the promise. God has spoken, and what He speaks comes to pass. A year later, she cradles Isaac in her arms. This is truly a miracle baby, the result of a most unlikely conception, pregnancy and birth. Now there is no doubt: Sarah laughs for joy.

The miracle will continue: The family line of Abraham and Isaac will weave throughout the Old Testament, sometimes faithful to God, sometimes not. But to Isaac's son, Jacob, will many sons be born, the patriarchs of the nation of Israel. The promise will be true. Abraham's descendants will be great in number.

Even more, however, is this: Eventually to the line of Isaac will be born another miracle Baby of a most unlikely conception and birth: He will be conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the virgin Mary. By His life, death and resurrection, He will redeem the world and save His people. All who believe in Him will live by faith as His household-His family; therefore all who believe in Him will be descendants of Abraham. In Christ, the promise is especially fulfilled: Abraham's descendants are as many as the sands of the seashore and the stars of the sky. In Christ, more are added every day.

Behold the faith of Abraham and Sarah:

Our text concludes:

“These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country.”

Abraham, who believes despite all appearances, leaves a home he knows for a home where he is not recognized; and Sarah, who believes against all odds, trusts the Lord’s promise and laughs at its fulfillment. The Lord speaks, and His Word is far more certain than the opinions of man or the laws of nature. Therefore, even though they do not see the promise fulfilled right away, they trust the Lord at His Word, knowing that the unseen kingdom of heaven is certain too; for God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them. (Heb. 11:16b)

2. Living by Faith

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. (Heb. 11:1)

The verse sounds somehow poetic and beautiful, comforting in an abstract sort of way. But for all who live in this world, it's a difficult statement to take. Many people are skeptical of such promises. They say, "I'll believe it when I see it," followed closely by "Talk is cheap." We tend to count on things that our eyes behold, and we regard mere words with skepticism. However, our Lord gives us faith with forgiveness, then bids us to trust in things hoped for but unseen.

The promises of God are many, and they are good. The Lord promises that He works all things for the good of those who love Him, and who does not take comfort in the news that God is in control? The Lord promises that the Son of Man comes with healing in His wings, so that we are guaranteed deliverance from disease and injury, sickness and affliction. The Lord promises strength against temptation so that we no longer do those stupid sins that we're so good at committing over and over. He promises that He has overcome the world, that He is the King of king and Lord of lords; and what great comfort for a church that faces persecution and scorn. And, of course, He promises that He is the resurrection and the life—that through Him we are delivered even from death.

These promises are the Word of the Lord. They are sure, and they are yours. Certain. Guaranteed. No doubt about it.

The problem is that you don't see it yet, and your sinful nature whispers that God's talk is cheap and you shouldn't count on what you can't see. So your Old Adam spends his numbered days trying to persuade you that God's promises are worthless. God promises that all things work together for good; your Old Adam responds that it sure doesn't look that way when the relationship ends or you're laid off at work – how is that working for your good? God promises healing; the Old Adam uses every sickness to tell you that that promise obviously doesn't apply to you. God promises deliverance from temptation; so your Old Adam uses every sin you do to try to persuade you that you don't have, and can't have, enough faith to be saved. God promises that He's overcome the world; your Old Adam

tells you to look at what you can see of the world on the evening news, for surely it will show you that God is not in control, and the Church can never make a difference in the world today. God promises deliverance from death; your Old Adam uses grief and death to tell you that death is just too powerful, that such a deliverance is an empty promise.

The promise is not empty. The tomb is. And because your crucified Lord is raised from the dead, He will keep all of His promises.

Remember what the Bible says about faith: It is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

Be reassured, dear friends: The promises of God are certain because of Jesus. For your sake, He journeyed far from home, much farther than Abraham, taking on the flesh of a man when he was born of the Virgin Mary. Although this world is His creation, He was certainly a stranger, for His own received Him not and He was stricken and afflicted by men. He came as a pilgrim with a destination from the start: His destination was the cross, to die for your sins. At the cross, He appeared no more the King than Abraham appeared the possessor of his kingdom, and his resurrection appeared no more possible than Sarah giving birth.

But eyes deceive while faith believes: At the cross, the Son of God dies for your sin. Three days later, He rises from the dead. This is certain, for God Himself says so.

One might liken the promises of God to a trust fund: Imagine a little girl who receives a sizeable inheritance. The last will and testament of the deceased declares that the money is hers, and that she can begin to collect it when she turns 21 years of age. Therefore, the money is hers even now – the documents say so, but she will not enjoy all the benefits, or even see the funds, until later on. In the meantime, however, she has confidence and security for the future. If she doubts, all she need do is pull out documents to be reassured. "Trust fund" is a good name: Though she does not see the money, she trusts that it is there. Her trust is not based upon empty hope or fanciful speculation, but upon the word that has been given.

It is to you, strangers and pilgrims, that the Word has been given. The treasures of heaven are yours. In the words of the Gospel lesson, have no fear, little flock, for the Father is pleased to give you His kingdom -- and His kingdom is yours even now. Christ has died for you to win forgiveness for your sins. That forgiveness is yours even now. That faith is yours even now. His presence in His Word and Sacraments is yours even now. His kingdom and all of His benefits and gifts for you are yours even now-even though they often remain unseen. All these are yours for the sake of Jesus, who has died to cleanse you from your sin; for His sake, God is not ashamed to be called your God, and He has prepared the New Jerusalem of heaven for you.

This is living by faith, for faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. We live like Abraham, trusting that Word to be true despite all appearances. We live like Sarah, believing against the opinions and odds. But while these things are unseen, they are certain, for the words and promises of God declare. He has died, He is risen, and He speaks His certain Word to you now - that you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.