

When he was 75 years old, God told Abram, *‘Leave your father’s household, take your family and your things, and go!’* The scriptures doesn’t say that Abram decided to first make a list of pro’s and con’s – something most people would do when faced with a difficult decision, such as packing up and moving your whole life at the age of 75. That’s because for Abram, he didn’t have to make a decision. God already did that for him, and he didn’t hesitate. He simply said, *‘Amen’* (let it be so), and he moved to that foreign land called Canaan, just as God told him to do.

And as you could imagine, it wasn’t easy for Abram. Yes, he trusted that God would protect him and lead him to a new home. But like any believer, he struggled along the way. At one point a severe famine struck the land, and he had to do something, so he moved to Egypt. The problem was, his wife, Sarai, was a very beautiful woman. Abram was afraid that one of the local officials would want her as a wife and have him killed. *“Then how would God be able to fulfill his promise to me?”* So he told Sarai to pretend to be his sister – and it was half-true, because she was his half-sister. Long story short, God saw to it that both of them were safely escorted out of the country, and they returned to Canaan.

Abram wasn’t perfect. He followed the Lord, but he struggled in his faith. The fact that God continued to extend his promises to him is a testament to the grace of God. He didn’t deserve this, and yet the Lord told him, *“I will protect you and bless you.”* Even if that going into battle against four heathen kings with his own private army to rescue his nephew Lot, Abram believed the Lord would protect and bless him. And the Lord gave this 80-year-old man victory and success in his first military campaign.

“¹ 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.” God showed that he was Abram’s shield in times of physical threat or danger; he didn’t have to be afraid of famine or even heathen kings and their armies. ***“Do not be afraid, Abram...I am your very great reward.”*** Even if all his land and livestock and possessions were taken away, Abram’s greatest treasure and resource was the Lord himself. The Lord was telling him, *‘I love you and will give you everything you need – you have nothing to be afraid of.’*

But even as the Lord spoke these words of power and comfort, Abram was afraid. He said, ***“² ...O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless...? ³ ...You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”*** For the past several years Abram remembered the promises first spoken to him when the Lord told him to pick up and move. ***“I will make you into a great nation,”*** (12:2); ***“To your offspring I will give this land,”*** (12:7); ***“All peoples on earth will be blessed through you,”*** (12:3). But something just didn’t click in Abram’s mind.

For one thing, his wife Sarai was barren. Even in her younger years, it was physically impossible for her to bear children. She was 65 years old when God first told them about all their offspring that would become a great nation. Even more amazing and wonderful was the promise that the Messiah would come from their offspring and be a blessing to all peoples on earth. At least that’s what God said. But each second that ticked by, the older they were getting, and the more improbable it seemed for them to have children of their own. From our human perspective, it wasn’t just ‘improbable’ – it was virtually impossible! There was no reason for them to expect that they could have children, not now when Sarai was already 70 years old.

No reason, that is, except that the Lord said it would happen. And what if the Lord had told them, *‘Look, you’re going to have to wait 20 more years until Sarai is 90, and then she’ll give birth to a son,’* do you think it would have been easier for them to believe? Or would they have thought, *‘Lord, if you’re not going to give us a son, just tell us right up front so that we can make other arrangements.’*

In a sense, that’s what they were already thinking. Abram had already discounted the possibility that they could have a child of their own. ***“² 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?”*** As many times as he tried to play out the scenario in his mind, he kept coming up with the same result: that he would have to legally adopt his head servant, Eliezer, to pass on his inheritance to his ‘son.’ But this bothered Abram, because that’s not what the Lord promised. The Lord promised Abram his own offspring, and that the Messiah would come through him, but at that point it just wasn’t making any sense!

It would be nearly 20 years before the Lord fulfilled that promise with the birth of their son, Isaac. And it would be nearly 2,000 years before the birth of their greater Son, Jesus. But in both cases, it wasn’t about what made sense or what was more probable or likely from a human perspective. The only way that either of these promises could make any sense was through faith. Faith was the key to believing what God was telling them, even if every fiber of their human strength and wisdom concluded otherwise. Because God said so, it has to be true.

Through faith that’s the conclusion that we come to. If anyone other than the Lord had made these kinds of promises, it would have made no sense at all. The difference is, when the Lord speaks, his word is powerful and inspires faith and

strength to believe. After all those moments of doubt and frustration, it was the word of the Lord that made all the difference: “**Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.**”

For us, also, a 2,000-year barrier of time separates us from the events we just celebrated last week. We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. It doesn't make sense to the sinful human heart. But for us who believe, it is the power of God unto salvation! No, we didn't see it with our own eyes, but we know it's true: Abraham's seed was born into this world in Bethlehem. God's own Son took on human flesh and lived a sinless life for 33 years in this world. We didn't see it with our own eyes, but we believe that Jesus suffered and died on the cross as the complete payment for our sins. And even though he was dead, God raised him to life. These are the facts, and we haven't seen a single one of these with our own eyes.

That's how powerful faith is, the gift that God gave to Abram and Sarai, and that he also gave to you and me. We accept the impossible as truth and regard our salvation as an undeniable fact. Why? Because the word of the Lord says so. And every day we live with the certainty that through faith in his Son, God has already declared us 'not guilty.' And at the end of your life, you know that your eternity will be with your Savior in heaven, because God has declared you righteous for the sake of Christ.

The strange thing is, though, as confident as we are with God's promises of our eternity, it's the everyday promises that we struggle to make sense of. Maybe your mortgage is upside down, and your investments haven't done so well, either. Your personal relationships are bound to struggle, but why is it so hard to see the good in this? Do you ever make a really bad decision and then wonder how you're going to make it right? *'God, you've promised to make all things work out for my good, but maybe I need to step in and fix things as best as I can. And if I can't do it, then I'll leave it up to you.'*

But that's not faith. It's second-guessing God's promise and turning to our old, unreliable selves for the solutions. And we wait, but the longer we wait, the more we wonder, *"When will God intervene for my good?"* And the more we wonder, the more we seem to lose focus on the promise. We ask ourselves, *"If God really loves me, wouldn't he see how much I need this right now."*

He does see, and he has promised to see. But instead of focusing on God's track record of faithfulness and the integrity of his word, our sinful nature looks elsewhere. It looks to the 'what if's' that might explain why God might not keep his promises to us. *"What if I haven't done enough for him? What if I've messed up so badly that he doesn't want to help me? What if God needs me to intervene, so he can give me what I've asked for?"* The sinful nature uses these 'what if's' to account for the possibility that either God can't or doesn't want to keep his promises. And the key to fulfilling his promises becomes...you.

My faith can shift from God's word to myself, the moment I stop listening to those promises. Only God's promises mean anything. Only God's word can carry me safely home. And yet I often let my self-trusting, impatient, doubting, proud sinful nature get the best of me. Instead of trusting and waiting on God's timing and working, I trust in what I can see. And what I can see is what I'm doing. That makes sense, doesn't it?

Not if you're honest about your own capabilities. Not if you understand the limitations of your own wisdom and strength. Not if you realize how often you have failed to trust your Lord, and that for these sins you deserve his wrath and punishment. Because that's the truth, too!

But like a loving Father, God already knows your fears and doubts. And instead of turning away from you, he has come to you with his word of forgiveness and peace. **"Do not be afraid,"** he says to you, **"I am your shield and your very great reward."** God has already proven his great love for us. He has given his own Son to suffer and die. He even gives the proof that his Son accomplished our salvation: he rose from the grave! He gave us his word, and he made good on it. And when he gives us his word to care for us and let nothing separate us from him, he gives us the faith to believe it.

Follow your Lord faithfully along the path he has prepared for you, knowing that every one of his promises is true. Let his word and sacraments strengthen your faith to see how much he loves you. His love covers you, not only for your spiritual well being but for your earthly, daily bread, too. Rejoice in this gift of faith, which allows you to believe the impossible and to live with the confidence of all your sins forgiven. You are righteous in God's sight because of Jesus. Take heart, and encourage one another with the word of God's love, because yes, this is true. Amen.