

"Extreme Faith"
Genesis 12:1-9

March 8,2020

2nd Sunday in Lent

In 1997, I accepted a call to serve as pastor of Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Ravenna, Nebraska. I remember trying to explain what I was doing and why to some of my non-churched friends with whom I bowled in Wisconsin. They knew I was a pastor, but didn't understand all the ins and outs of it. One fellow bowler, slightly older than me, was really trying hard to understand why I was leaving Wisconsin and moving out to Nebraska. He said, "Steve, you really must like that place in Nebraska to uproot your family and move halfway across the country." I said, "No, I've never been to that place before my life." He looked a little puzzled and tried again, "Well, you must have some really good friends out there that you would pack up your family and move them that great distance." Again, I responded, "I've never met a single person from that town before." Now, he was very puzzled and he finally asked, "Steve, why are you doing this?" I tried to tell him that I received a call from the congregation to serve as their pastor and I was going there on faith. He just walked away, shaking his head, and still not understanding that I was doing.

Many people, even some who claim to be Christian, fail to understand the nature of faith. For some, faith simply means of vague belief in a Supreme Being. For others, faith means knowledge of the Bible or religious beliefs. But faith always involves action. During Lent, we emphasize all that Jesus did for us in His perfect life, His sacrificial death on the cross, and His glorious resurrection from death on the third day in order to free us from the curse of the Law, forgive all of our sins against that Law, and lead us in the way to go to everlasting life. However, none of this is possible if we have no way to receive the benefits of Jesus' Passion. Faith is what receives the promises of God and acts on them.

Some people would say that my family and I had a lot of faith to leave our home in Wisconsin and go to Nebraska and that it must have been very difficult to do. While faith was involved here (as it is in every aspect of a Christian's life), it may not have been as difficult as you might think. For those of you who served in the military, leaving a familiar place and moving to a location with which you are not familiar may not seem to be a big deal. In my case, in traveling out to Nebraska, I had a call document in hand which meant that I had a position in which to serve when I got there. Within that document was a promise for the congregation to pay me for serving and so I had money to support my family. It was a nice parsonage waiting so I had a place for my family to live. There wasn't a whole lot of risk involved.

Our text today from Genesis is about a man who was called by God to move his family a great distance. Some would say that Abram must have had it even easier. He must be pretty special if he is included in the Bible. For the Jews, the reason why Abraham was called by God was because he had a lot of faith in God and was an obedient man. But that's wrong. When God called Abram, he was an idolater and serving the moon goddess in his native land of Ur.

Well, then, God must've chosen him because he was a nice young man who would be a good prospect with whom to create a new nation. But that's wrong, too. Abram was far from being a spring chicken. In fact, when God called Abram, he was seventy-five years old.

Well, then, God must've called Abram because he had no family and thus no commitments holding him back. It would be easy for him to go on this arduous journey. Wrong again. Abram had to leave his extended family (taking only his immediate family) and his father's house to go to where God was calling him.

Well, then, it must've been easier for Abram because God gave him a detailed itinerary (like my call documents) of where he was going. Still wrong. The Lord chose not to be specific about the details. All that the Lord would reveal is that Abram should go to a land that God would identify when he got there.

Surely then it must've been easier for Abram to go because the Lord had given him detailed plans of how He would make of him a great nation; make his name great; and bless all nations through him. To see these plans unfolding would've easily made Abram convinced he should go, right? But that's not true, either. Abram would see very little of these promises fulfilled. His first descendent would not be born for 25 years. He would not own a square inch of the Promised Land until he bought a cave in which to bury Sarah after she died. The blessing of all people through the coming Messiah and Savior would not be realized for several thousand years.

Like my bowling buddy back in Wisconsin, you might be shaking your heads and wondering why did Abram even do this. It doesn't make any sense. He has no way of knowing what will happen along the way and whether they'll even get to this "Promise Land." How could he become a great nation if he still had no sons at the age of 75? Nevertheless, Abram packed up his immediate family and was on his way.

How did Abram do it? It's no wonder that the Jews believed that Abram earned his place as the Father of the Jewish nation by his obedience. It's also obvious, both to the Jews of Jesus' time and to you and me today, that we could never be like Abram and do the things that he did. He is just so far above us that we could never be like him.

St. Paul addresses that question in our epistle reading for today. He writes, "What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.'" (Romans 4:1-3)

Abram was no better than the Jews of Jesus' day. Abram was no better than you or me. In fact, as a heathen idolater, it could be argued that Abraham was worse off than you or me. Abram was not justified (declared right with God) because of anything he did. He simply believed the promises of God and God counted that trust, that faith, as righteousness. Through faith and faith alone, Abraham was declared to be right before God.

But that faith was more than a belief in the existence of God or simply a way to become right with God. Abram lived by that faith and let that faith determine his course of action. He heard the Word and promises of the Lord and lived life according to that

Word and those promises. It was the Word of God and the promises of God, not Abram, that accomplished great things.

Abram was converted to faith in the Lord by the Word of the Lord when He called Abram. Abram believed in God's promise of becoming a father of a great nation with many descendants even though he was an old man with no children. Abram believed in God's promise of possessing the land of Canaan even though he was a wandering nomad who had no territory. Abram believed in God's promise that he and his descendants would be a blessing to the entire world because a Savior would come from his descendants even though there was no evidence of such a Savior during the life of Abram.

Make no mistake about it, Abram was far from perfect. His faith was far from perfect also. Worries and doubts were raised in his mind on more than one occasion. He tried to "help" God keep His promise by adopting a trusted servant to be his legal heir or by having a child himself with Sarah's slave girl, Hagar. But Abram believed in and trusted the mercy of the Lord. His sins were forgiven and he was restored, time and time again. His face was continually being reinvigorated through the words spoken by the Lord to him.

To those of you who would think that you could not possibly have faith like the great Bible character Abram, my question would be, "Why not?" You and I are sinful human beings like Abram who often distrust and disbelieve the Word of God. You and I have many great promises from God. We are part of the family of Abram. We have been blessed by the Descendant of Abram, Jesus Christ, who delivers the forgiveness for our sins here on earth and has a place in the great Promise Land of heaven waiting for us. If anything, you and I have it even better than Abram because we were born into the Christian faith and not into a pagan nation like him.

Lack of saving faith or the ability to live by faith is not because you are not a biblical character. It is because of the presence of sin. Going back to Adam and Eve, sin has always been a lack of trust in God and a lack of belief in His promises. Adam and Eve sinned because they did not believe that God had given them everything they needed and they did not trust Him to supply what they needed in the future.

We doubt and even disbelieve because of our lack of contentment with what God has given us; our desire to have something other than what God has promised us; and our inability to trust God to do what He has promised. There is nothing that you or I can do to change this. We cannot decide to have faith or trust in God on our own. The Word of God reminds us," For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Faith, whether it be that of Abram or of us, has its origin in God. It is a gift of God, not the result of our own efforts, that is worked in our hearts by the power of the Word of God. Everyone who is baptized receives the same Holy Spirit who, by the Word of God, works faith in them. It is by this faith we are declared right before God. It is by this faith that we can live, like Abram did, in obedience to the Law of God.

Why do we so often feel as if our faith is different or weaker than Abram? It certainly not because Abram is better than you or me or that we have more difficult

circumstances than Abram did. Faith becomes weak when faith is not fed. It's like encountering an emaciated person who is nothing but skin and bones and complains because of how weak he feels. You offer him food, but he declines because his mother forced him to eat food when he was a child and he never got anything out of it.

Without food, it is impossible to have a healthy body and continue living. Without the Word of God, it is impossible to have a healthy faith by which you live. Hearing the same Word of God which converted you and brought you to faith is the only way to maintain and strengthen that faith. And it is only a healthy faith that can take God at his Word, trust in His promises, and follow Him.

Hearing the Word of God as much as you can as often as you can is not a religious rule or spiritual duty which you have to do. It is feeding time for the soul. It is strengthening time for your faith. Through the Word of God, you can discern the clear promises of God, not what you think God's promises are or what we would desire them to be. By the power of the Holy Spirit you are able to act upon those promises, no matter how easy or hard they might be; no matter how possible or impossible we think they are; and no matter how much you want to or don't want to follow them.

"Extreme" seems to be a buzzword today which intensifies an activity or product by adding the word to its name. I think it began with "extreme games." Extreme games (or "Xgames" as they came to be called) are those action sports perceived as involving a higher degree of risk, speed, a high level of physical exertion and highly specialized gear. As a result, many younger people think "extreme" is a good thing. Some may think that Abram had an extreme faith (X-faith?), But I don't think he did. He had simple biblical faith. Believe in what God said because he said it. Obey what God said because He has promised good things. Receive what God promised because He keeps his promises. That was Abram's faith. May it be our faith as well. Amen