

# "Promises, Promises!"

Genesis 12:1-9

March 20, 2011

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday In Lent

A man puts a cold cup of coffee in the microwave and punches in one minute worth of time. The technology of the day assures him of having a hot cup of coffee when the time is up. Still, he stands there, watching the microwave and muttering to himself, "Come on, I don't have all minute." (Bruce Kempf told me that story about one of his friends and it still makes me laugh.) Although it was probably said in jest, such an incident illustrates an important truth: We don't do well with just promises, no matter how sure. We want results. And we don't want to have to wait for the results. We want them now.

Our modern technology encourages such attitudes. No matter how fast our technology delivers the goods, we want it faster. Email wasn't fast enough (even though it was much faster than the ancient method of letter writing). Instant messages, tweeting, texting, and cell phones are the preferred modes of communication today. We don't want to wait for anything. We want what we want and we want it now.

Promises don't cut it with us now. We've all been the victims of broken promises. We are skeptical about promises, even jaded when the results promised are too wonderful to believe. We've heard it all before. A handshake and a man's word are no longer sufficient to seal a deal. We need lawyers and signed contracts to make sure that we get what we have coming to us. And if the stipulation of a contract is not met in a timely manner, then we can sue to get what we have coming to us in a shorter amount of time.

God acts so very differently and we see that in our Old Testament lesson for today. The Lord calls Abram to follow him. This may not surprise us because we know so much about Abram's life after this event. We think that Abram was a pretty good guy and, because of that, the Lord chose him for something special. Nothing could be further from the truth. When the Lord called Abram, Abram

was an unbeliever and idolater. He came from the city of Ur in the land of the Chaldeans who worshiped other gods (Joshua 24:2). God, in His mercy, called Abram by grace to trust in Him.

The Lord then told Abram to leave His country, his family, and his home – everything He had – to follow Him. Where? The Lord didn't say, except to tell Abram that it would be "to the land that I will show you." How would you like someone to invite you to go on a trip, the destination of which they would tell you when you got there and not before. I doubt that many of us would be willing to leave all we have for such an uncertain journey.

All the Lord has to give to Abram is three promises. First, the Lord would give the land where Abram would end up to his descendants. This promise was interesting because, when the Lord made it, Abram had no land. Secondly, the Lord would make of Abram a great nation. This promise was interesting because Abram was 75 years old at the time and didn't have a single child yet. Thirdly, the Lord promised to bless all the nations of the earth through Abram. This was an interesting promise to make to a man who had neither an estate or an heir.

Modern day man would have ignored the Lord's call as utterly too fantastic to believe. At the very least, he would demand to know of the Lord where he was going and to get some proof of what he was going to get before he started.

Yet Abram astoundingly answered the Lord's call in faith and obediently followed His direction. He left his country, his family, and his home. He goes on a journey of which he does not know the final destination. And, when he arrives, he has no land, no descendants, and no Messianic blessing. Was Abram gypped? No, not at all. The Lord kept everyone of His promises in His way and in His time. Abram's descendants *did* get the land promised to Abram four hundred years later. The Lord *did* make Abram into a great nation, starting with the very first heir, Isaac, twenty five years after the Lord first made the promise. And the Lord *did* bless all the nations of the earth through the Messiah who would come from Abram's line two millennia later.

This is key for us. For the Lord calls us the same as He called Abram. He does not call us because we are good. By nature, before we were born, we were sinful and in a state of unbelief. Yet the Lord calls us, by grace alone, to trust Him and follow Him. As He did with Abram, the Lord calls us to leave behind our culture, our family ties, and our homes. He starts us on a journey that is as equally vague as Abram's. We are called to a Promised Land, to be a part of a great nation – the people of God, and to be blessed by the seed of Abram – Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Savior of the world.

What do we do? We don't want to leave behind our culture, our friends, and our families. We want to hold on to it. What we have "here and now" seems better than and more certain than what the Lord has promised to us sometime off in the future.

As a result, many never start the journey. They are content to remain behind in their own little Ur of the Chaldeans. Some abandon the journey when the going gets tough. Some give up hope in the promised land as being too much of a "pie in the sky" dream when there seems to be more pressing problems here on earth. People either stop believing in the promises of the Lord or don't want to wait for them to be fulfilled.

But the Lord fulfills His promises in His way and in His time. The last and greatest of the promises made to Abram – to bless all nations of the world through the coming Messiah – was fulfilled over two thousand years AFTER Abram died. Because that promise was fulfilled to Abram, all the promises to us will be fulfilled as well. Jesus did not come into this world to condemn the world, he says in our Gospel reading, but that the world might be saved through him.

The Messiah, Jesus, did this in a most unconventional way. He did not set up a kingdom with himself as a ruler to be served. He invited people to be part of a kingdom where He was a servant to serve. Jesus did not stamp out sin and evil with His might. Jesus died on the cross to forgive sin and evil. Jesus did not come to set up the good life on this earth. Jesus rose from the dead to give eternal life.

The Lord has called you and set you on a journey by means of your baptism. You have been born again, as Jesus told Nicodemus, through water and the Holy Spirit. The Lord has set you on a journey to a Promised Land called heaven. He has made you a part of a great nation – the kingdom of God – through the forgiveness of sins won for you by Jesus’ death on the cross and through His holiness given to you by Jesus’ perfect life lived in obedience to the Law of God. Like all the families of earth, you have been blessed through the seed of Abram, Jesus Christ. You have been given all of these promises. The Lord kept all of His promises to Abram. The Lord will keep all of His promises to you. He offers no proof and often times the fulfillment is slower than we would like. How do we then live?

We live like Abram. In the midst of a world that emphasizes “living in the moment”, the Lord asks you to consider life with Him as a calling and a journey. Life, as a journey, is always a work in process, rather than simply here and now.

Abram did not earn his place with the Lord by good works or come to faith by being obedient. In fact, it was just the opposite. In our epistle reading for today, Paul discounts the notion that Abram became right with God by good works. He quotes the Scriptures where it says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” Abraham was justified – made right with God – by faith. We are justified – made right with God – by faith. Abraham’s faith resulted in obedience. Our faith results in obedience as well.

We obediently follow the Lord on the journey of life and trust His promises to be true. As they were true for Abram and have been true for us, they will continue to be true along the journey. When we are bothered by sin and feel our guilt, He promises forgiveness and peace through His body and blood, given and shed for you, in the Lord’s Supper. When we worry about the things necessary for this life, He promises to care for us. He says, “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. When we feel isolated as Christians in a world which is hostile to the Law of God and rejects faith in God, He gives us each other and promises us His

presence among us. He says, "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them." When we despair over earthquakes, tsunamis, nuclear disasters, failed economies, wars and rebellions, and all of the things which would stamp out life in this world, He promises us life forever. He says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

Promises, in and of themselves, have no value. It all depends on who is making the promise. If the one making the promise is unreliable, chances are the promises are worthless. However, if the One making the promises is trustworthy, then the promises are more valuable than anything we have at the present time. The Lord has made tremendous promises. He is trustworthy. He kept His promises to Abram. He has kept His promises to us. He will keep all future promises to us, as well, until the day when there is no need for no more promises, but only perpetual fulfillment by His side in the everlasting life in heaven. Amen.