

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost; September 25, 2022

Genesis 12:1-8

“Faith Believes the Impossible and Does the Difficult”

**Now the LORD said to Abram, “Get out of your country and away from your relatives and from your father’s house and go to the land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation. I will bless you and make your name great. You will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse anyone who dishonors you. All of the families of the earth will be blessed in you.”**

**So Abram went, as the LORD had told him. Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed Haran. Abram took Sarai his wife, Lot his brother’s son, and all the possessions they had accumulated and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to travel to the land of Canaan. Eventually they arrived in the land of Canaan. Abram passed through the land until he came to the Oak of Moreh at the place called Shechem. The Canaanites were in the land at that time.**

**The LORD appeared to Abram and said, “I will give this land to your descendants.” Abram built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.**

**He moved on from there to the hill country east of Bethel and pitched his tent there, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and proclaimed the name of the LORD. Abram pulled out from there and kept traveling toward the Negev.**

Every day you see and hear unbelievable things. In your email you see a message from the crown prince of Malawi. Even though Malawi is a presidential republic and has no royal family, the crown prince has some funds that he needs to transfer to an American bank account – millions of dollars, in fact. All he needs from you is your Social Security number and bank account number, and he promises that all the money will be transferred into your possession. All you will have to do then is send a bit back to him. You get to keep the rest. This is all unbelievable, of course. And so a rational person treats it as such, and dismisses it.

A mother hears her small son say that the chocolate on his face is not, in fact, any indication of whether or not he disobeyed her and ate cookies so close to dinner. He promises her, from the bottom of his sweet and innocent heart, that he has not disobeyed her. Never mind the chocolate, or the guilty face behind it, or the shaky voice with which he speaks. This is unbelievable, of course. And so a mother treats it as such, and dismisses it.

Where else do you hear and see impossible claims and promises? The world is full of con artists, liars, swindlers and snake oil salesman. So you’ve probably heard enough unbelievable claims and promises that by this time you dismiss them automatically. They no longer stand a chance with you.

Well, for the record, Abram was not stupid. In fact, if you read the whole story of Abram’s life in the book of Genesis, you will find an extremely intelligent man. He was a success as a business man: extremely wealthy. And Abram was not a gullible man, either. He suffered no far-fetched tales or crazy claims from other people. Abram was the kind of man who knew when he was hearing something unbelievable. And

he was the kind of man who was smart enough to do what we all do with the unbelievable: dismiss it immediately...

...With one very notable exception. In Genesis chapter 12, God spoke to Abram and told him three things – three promises – that make the claims of Malawi princes and chocolate-faced children seem downright reasonable. God came to Abram when he was already seventy-five years old and promised him, **“I will make you a great nation.”** Abram had been trying – without success – to have children with his wife Sarai for decades. And now he heard the promise – in his old age – that he and his wife would not only have a son, but that one day their descendants would be a great nation of people. It was a most unbelievable promise, the silliest of the silly.

Until God got to the second promise, which managed to trump the first in sheer un-believability. **“I will bless you and make your name great. You will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse anyone who dishonors you...”** What made this second promise so unbelievable? Well, up to that point in his life, God had not blessed Abram in the most basic, but important way. He had not given Abram a son, an heir to carry on his name and legacy. And in Abram’s world, that one blessing was bigger than anything else. Forget money, land, animals, soldiers or servants. It was all about sons. And God had blessed him with exactly zero of those. And now God comes along and says, “I will bless you.” Right.

A great nation. Unbelievable. Rich blessings. No one could believe it. And finally, the richest one of them all: **“All of the families of the earth will be blessed through you.”** And how exactly can one person be a blessing to every family in the world – including the countless who came before him, and the endless families who would come after him, even the people in lands that he could not even imagine existed?

It’s all unbelievable, from top to bottom. And then Abram believed every single word of it. In Genesis 15, where God makes these same unbelievable promises to Abram, it says: **Abram believed the LORD.** Abram was not stupid; far from it. And he was not gullible; he was a totally reasonable man. So why did he believe the totally unbelievable? Well, why do you?

Why do you believe that the Son of God took on the flesh of a human being and was born of a virgin? Why do you believe that pouring water over a baby’s head does anything for the child at all, other than get him wet? Why do you believe that one day dead bodies will rise back up from the earth to live forever? Why do you believe that a lone man’s death on a cross two thousand years ago benefits you now and forever? Are these promises that God makes to you – are they not all totally irrational? Do they not all offend human intelligence? Are they not all utterly unbelievable? They are. So what, then? Are you stupid people? I know most of you fairly well, and you are not stupid. Are you all gullible people who will believe anything? I don’t get the impression that there are too many wooden nickels in your change jars at home.

You’re smart and rational people too, like Abram. People who would never respond to an email from the prince of Malawi or exonerate a kid with chocolate all over his face. You believe the unbelievable for the same reason Abram did: God has called you to it. If it were up to you, with all your brains and your rationality, you would never have believed such unbelievable things. But it wasn’t up to you. God gave you trust in the unbelievable. He has worked – and is still working in you – through the good news of forgiveness in Christ. With that good news, which he delivers to you in Word and Sacrament, his Spirit has

given you faith to believe what you – and no one else, either – ever would or could. God has taken away your sin in his Son Jesus Christ. He came, true God, born of a virgin, to set you free from God’s wrath. He came to rise so that you will too. He came to open heaven so that you will live there forever. It’s too much for any person to believe. But by God’s grace, you do.

So what happened to Abram when he believed God’s unbelievable promises? What happens for you through your faith? **Abraham believed God, and God counted it to him as righteousness.** God makes his promises of salvation to the entire human race. But only by faith do we take hold of his promises and make them our own. When we do, God counts us righteous. It’s not that we are righteous by our own merit. But he counts us righteous, he declares us perfect, in his Son Jesus. Faith receives that gift.

When Abram believed, God’s promises took effect for him. When we believe, his promises take effect for us personally. Abram believed, and he received all that God said he would. He was blessed with a son in his old age, and did become the great nation of Israel. God’s blessing did follow him all the way to the grave and beyond. And, most importantly, all people on earth were blessed through him. Through him God sent his own Son into the world, in whom we believe and receive all of God’s promises to us.

Abram believed the unbelievable. And so do we, by the Spirit’s power. Abram’s faith made God’s promises his own, and so does our faith. And then, even more unbelievable things started to happen in Abram’s life. He was already old and rich. He was firmly settled in the land where he had lived his whole life. He was comfortable and set for his twilight years. But then, in addition to those impossible promises, God gave Abram some impossible commands to keep: **“Get of your own country and away from your relatives and from your father’s house and go the land I will show you.”** What nonsense! To tell an old guy like Abram to leave the only home he’s ever known and go – where exactly?! God doesn’t even tell him where to go! He just says, “Leave.” That’s wild.

**So Abram went, as the LORD had told him. Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed Haran. Abram took Sarai his wife, Lot his brother’s son, and all the possessions they had accumulated and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to travel to the land of Canaan. Eventually they arrived in the land of Canaan. Abram passed through the land until he came to the Oak of Moreh at the place called Shechem. The Canaanites were in the land at that time.**

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The land to which God ended up leading Abram was the most valuable, war-torn terrain on the planet. It was rich and beautiful and centrally located, and therefore always fought for. (It still is, to this day.) But Abram left the comfort and safety of his home to settle there instead. And when God told Abram, “This land will belong to your family someday,” Abram settled there. He built an altar to the Lord, then moved right into the heart of that land and pitched his tent, as if to say, “This is my home.” And then he built another altar and worshiped the Lord yet again.

It was such a crazy thing to do. For an old man to move and settle into a dangerous place and call it home. And then, during and after, to build an altar to worship the Lord and proclaim his name. None of it made any sense at all. But Abram did it. Why? Simply because he had faith. The same faith in God's Word that made him righteous, that same faith also led Abram to follow God's commands to the letter, no matter how inconvenient or even scary it might have been.

You see, God's gift of faith has that effect on his people who believe. Your faith in Jesus – the unbelievable promises God makes in him – that faith makes you righteous in God's eyes. But it does more than that. It also makes you obedient. Even when God commands you to do something that on the surface is totally nuts, you do it. That's the effect of saving faith God's people. It causes them to follow his commands, even when it's hard, even when it's scary.

And sometimes doing God's will is exactly that. It's scary to follow God when he says, "Your body belongs to me, not you. Stay pure, because I say so." It's scary because your friends are going to make fun of you. You're going to be weird in a world that insists, "My body belongs to me, and I can do whatever I want with it." It's frightening when you're on a tight budget, and God commands, "Make a joyful, generous first fruit offering to me." It sounds nuts. It makes no sense. I need to buy stuff for myself first! But faith follows the command, even when it's tough. It's not easy when God says, "Pray for your enemies. Honor those in authority, even when you disagree with them." It's the opposite of our instincts; it's hard. But faith doesn't just believe God's promises and receive his righteousness. It obeys, too, even God's commands seem impossible to obey.

Do you struggle to keep God's difficult commandments – the ones that tell you to be strange, or to go against the grain of the world? If we do – and we all do – then what do we need? We don't need a scolding or a guilt trip. We need a stronger faith. Abram's story teaches us that faith receives righteousness and obeys God's commands, even the tough ones. So when you struggle with those more challenging commandments, nurture your faith. Focus on your Savior in his Word and his Supper. The Spirit will strengthen your faith to believe God's promises and to do his will – especially when it seems impossible.

By God's gift of faith, you believe the impossible and receive everything good thing the Lord has accomplished for you in his Son. His love for you in Jesus will make your faith even stronger, along with your will to do his will.