

Remember Me

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: At seventy-five years of age, Abram of the Mesopotamian city of Ur (and more recently, a citizen of the newer and more progressive city of Haran) had lived a full and successful life. In his day, which was about four thousand years ago, just getting to the age of seventy-five in reasonable health was quite an achievement, what with all the famines, plagues, and violence prevalent in the ancient world. But not only did Abram make it to this ripe old age, he managed to do it in style. During his life he had amassed a sizable fortune. He was the owner and manager of a very large estate that employed several hundred, perhaps even a thousand or more servants. And he acquired all he had through hard work and wise leadership. You see, Abram had something of a pioneer's spirit. In his youth he had left the comforts of highly civilized Ur in the east – not far from where Baghdad is today, and he had journeyed west up the Euphrates river valley to what was at the time the rough and tumble frontier. He had set out with his father and brothers, drawn by the prospect of cheap land and high adventure. But taking the risks, and there were many, had paid off well. He had managed to carve out a small empire for himself out here in the Wild West – which maybe wasn't quite so wild any more since he had been a big part of bringing civilization here.

And now, having entered his golden years, he could look back on all he had accomplished with pride and satisfaction. He looked forward to spending his last few years in a rather easy retirement, enjoying the fruits of all his labors. I can easily imagine him supervising the construction of an elaborate tomb so that he could be laid to rest with his father and brother in the high style to which he had become accustomed. Certainly he would have wanted a lasting monument so future generations could remember what an influential, happy, and successful life he had enjoyed.

But if that is where his story ended, you and I would never have heard of Abram. His memory and his monument would have long since faded from history, lost and buried in the dust of time just like the cities and places he once called home. And though his name, Abram, means "exalted father", he would have died childless and without a single heir; so that not only would he have been erased from historical memory, he would not even have had a genetic contribution to the future. If this is where his story ended, then Abram and everything about him would be lost: forgotten by men in time ... and also forgotten by God in eternity.

That's right: forgotten even by the Lord, for you see, Abram was not a believer in the One True God. Oh, there were a few mythical corruptions of the true story of the God of Creation out there; but they had been twisted, confused, and embellished to the point that it was impossible to separate the truth from the myths. And for the most part, that's how the people treated their stories of the gods and goddesses: as myths. Besides, even if there were any truth to them, they believed that the gods and goddesses pursued their interests high above in the cosmos without ever thinking about the concerns of mere mortals. So for day to day and down to earth purposes, instead of worshipping those high gods above, each family had a collection of small household idols – lesser deities – that were called upon to assist with much more local concerns like warding off evil spirits, helping the crops to grow, and enhancing the fertility of people and livestock. They were really more like good luck charms than gods in the proper sense; and *that* was pretty much all there was to Abram's religion. The True God had long been forgotten by his ancestors, and consequently they too were forgotten by God. And

now as the curtain was about to fall on his earthly life, Abram was well on his way to the same unhappy fate.

But something changed all that. Abram has not been forgotten. Today, any person, regardless of his or her faith can visit the site of his rather unpretentious tomb in the city of Hebron. And a lot of people do. It's really a miserable little cave instead of a grand monument of marble; but visitors know that Abram's mortal remains lie there. Far from being forgotten, Abram is the one man whom the adherents of three major religions and several human races call "father". And let's face it, though you personally might not know much about him, apart from Abram and his immediate family, how many others of the hundreds of thousands of people who were living in Ur of the Chaldees four thousand years ago can you name? Not a one. They've all been forgotten ... and yes, I'm sad to say, they've even been forgotten by God.

So what made the difference? What changed things so that as his very successful life was drawing to its close, instead of being forgotten forever he's been remembered by more people than just about any person who ever lived? Was it some great achievement he accomplished? Well, no; we've already seen that despite his very impressive accomplishments, his existence would surely have been lost to human memory. Nor was it anything he wrote, or something he designed, created, or discovered. What was it then? Very simply, Abram is remembered solely because of the call and promise of God. Take that away, and as far as anyone is concerned, it's as if he never existed.

Now that's remarkable. But what's even more remarkable is what God told him in the call itself: *"Get going, Abram. Leave behind your country, your people, and your father's house. Leave behind the dream you've spent your entire life working on. I'm going to make you into something bigger and nobler than you could have possibly imagined."* Put yourself in Abram's sandals for a moment. Here in the twilight of your years, you're happily reflecting on the good name you've earned for yourself by a lifetime of honest, hard work. And now just as you're getting ready to put your feet up and take it easy, along comes a God you've never heard of who tells you you're going to do it all over again; but this time you're going to do it *his way* – and his way is to simply trust him to take care of things. *"Your job, Abram, is to hold out your hands and trust me to give you everything I promised."*

Now, I'm thinking that if I were Abram, I'd have a lot of questions: *"Tell me again who you are? And you want me, at my age, to leave all this behind? – All this that I've worked all my life to get? And you want me to travel hundreds of miles through a desolate wasteland and go to a place that's already occupied by hostile barbarians? And then you're just going to give that land to me? Just hand it over free, without any cost to me or struggle? And then on top of it all you're going to make me, a childless guy who's already old enough to be a great-grandfather, into an entire nation of people? What? Do I just look like an especially gullible guy?"* But Abram didn't ask those questions; because if he had, we wouldn't be here talking about him today.

Instead, we're told that Abram packed up what could be moved, and left. He stepped out in faith, leaving his old life and his old world – everything he'd worked for – left it all behind and forgot about it. He never looked back. He only looked forward to the goal, trusting in what God had promised him. Now, that defies logic. It made no sense to do what he did. But faith is not about logic or what makes sense. Faith is a gift of God just as much as is the promise of God that faith grabs hold of. And because the Lord gave Abram the gift of faith to trust in the promise, he received all the blessings that God said he would have.

Specifically God said, “*I will make your name great*”, and we’ve already seen that that’s been done. But God also said, “*You will be a blessing.*” He meant that Abram himself would in some way be a source of blessing for others. How? Well, two ways come immediately to mind: first, by simply sharing the promise God had made to him with others. Because he told his wife and servants about the promises of God, they too received the benefits of the promise. And you know, we talk in grand terms about Abram’s great leap of faith; but think for a moment about Sarai’s. She’s sixty-five years old, and one day her husband of nearly fifty years comes home and says, “*Hey, Honey, I’m home! Drop whatever it is you’re doing: I’ve got a big surprise for you: we’re moving. You see, God was talking to me today and he says he has some great plans for us. So, we need to get packing right away. Oh, and I’ve got another surprise: don’t forget to pack that crib that I made for us fifty years ago; the one we never used.*”

Now, bear in mind, the Lord hadn’t spoken to Sarai. She might well have wondered which one of those little stone idols in the family shrine above the fireplace that she dutifully dusted every week her old and now apparently mentally slipping husband believed was talking to him. But she didn’t. She too trusted in the promise God made to Abram. Simply by his sharing the message with her, she received the gift of faith that enabled her to believe it. And by faith, she too received the blessings of God.

And another way Abram became a blessing for others is by his example. In today’s Epistle lesson, St. Paul upholds Abram as the prototype of every Christian. Abram is the first and perfect example for us of what it means to be justified by God’s grace through faith and not by the things that we do. Apart from God’s promise and call, all the great achievements of his life added up to exactly zero. They all would have been forgotten and Abram would have spent eternity in hell. But by his faith in the promise alone, he attained lasting recognition and the eternal blessings of God.

The same is true for us. I recall a motion picture that came out several years ago (which I think was based on a Broadway play) called *Fame*. It was about some dancers who were working real hard at their craft because they wanted to make it to the big time through their artistic skills. And the theme song had a refrain that included words to this effect: “*I want to live forever, they’re going to remember my name.*” The thought seemed to be, *if only I could perform well enough, I would live forever in history because I would be remembered.* And this is a notion common to humankind. We all think that way to a certain extent. We want to be remembered. Specifically, we want to be remembered for something we’ve done – and so achieve by our performance at *something* a kind of lasting fame and eternal glory. And this is especially true when it comes to the spiritual side of life. The common assumption is that we can live forever with God on account of our achievements, if only we can perform well enough – because we want God to recognize and *remember* what good and devoted people we are. Paul’s point in today’s Epistle reading is that’s a dead end. Abram didn’t get to be an heir of the eternal Kingdom by what he did, or by what God remembered *about* him. He got it because God gave him the promise and the faith to believe it. We become heirs of the Kingdom exactly the same way. You see, God won’t remember us for what we did. In fact, he specifically says he’s going to forget what we did—which for sinners such as ourselves is a good thing. When you stand before him in judgment, you don’t want him to remember what you did. But he won’t; what the Lord says he will remember is the promise he made to you.

And the promise is this: God said to Abram: “*All families on earth will be blessed through you.*” It was a promise to send the Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ, into the world through the line of Abram’s descendants. It was a promise to bless the world by taking away its sin through his passion and death. This promise has been fulfilled. And now, when God thinks

of anyone who believes that promise, anyone from Abram and Sarai to *you*, he remembers what his Son did for sinners on the cross. And because his Son is always foremost in his mind, so is everyone who trusts in his Son.

What that means is God will remember you forever. And God's memory is not like ours. We sometimes speak of people who have died as living on in our memories. It's a nice thought; but it's not at all accurate. To you they're dead and gone. You can only remember who they were and what they did. All past tense. With time, the memory fades, and eventually you forget altogether – or you die and take the memories with you. But people who are remembered by God really do live on. To be known and remembered by him *is life*. It is to those who are lost that he says, "*I don't remember you ... I never knew you.*"

That's where we would be, lost and forgotten by God; but just like Abram, God has called us, given us his promise, and given us the faith to believe it. We witness that promise being made again and a new life of faith being born – of water and the Spirit – every time another one of us becomes a child of God through holy Baptism. And in hearing it again applied to someone else, the promise is renewed and reinforced to all of us. It reminds us that we too have received the same call and promise of God, and the same birth of faith by the power of the Holy Spirit. It's our guarantee that the Lord will never forget us, for as he has said, "I can't forget you: I've engraved you on the palms of my hands." And so the Lord Jesus did when the nails he endured for us pierced his flesh. Your name is written in Christ's wounds.

The call and promise we have received is the same one the Lord made to Abram, for we are all his heirs by faith. It's into his family that we are born by Baptism. And like he did for Abram, the Lord has promised to make your name great; not, perhaps, in the fading memory of the world, but in the eternal, living memory of God. And he's promised to make you a blessing to others. Like Abram, you can share the promise with people so that they too can share in its blessings. And like Abram, you can be an example of one who lives a holy life by faith not in your own achievements but in the Lord Jesus and what he did for you. And through him God has promised to lead you out of this world and this life to a land that you will possess forever. So may we, like Abram, put our trust in the One who has called us. And forsaking our achievements and stepping out in faith, let's remember the promise he's made; for in this way we will be remembered by Him in time and in eternity. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!