

God's Strength Displayed in Weakness

In the name of the almighty Son of God, dear friends in Christ: This morning's Old Testament lesson is something of a flashback. Last week we heard the account of Abraham's near sacrifice of his son, Isaac. It was the ultimate test of Abraham's faith. The Lord told him to take his beloved son, the one through whom the Lord had said to Abraham that he would fulfill all the promises he had made to make of him a great nation with descendants as innumerable as the sand on the sea shore, and sacrifice him as a burnt offering. It was an outrageous demand. Quite apart from the sheer horror of it – requiring a father to sacrifice his beloved son—that's unthinkable enough; but how could the Lord fulfill promises through a dead person? But despite the horror and the impossible logic, Abraham passed the test. He was willing to go through with it. He did it trusting that even if Isaac died, God would raise him up from the dead in order to keep his Word.

Now, as we heard, he didn't have to go through with it. Just as Abraham was about to open his son's throat with the knife, the Lord stayed his hand. It was enough that he was willing – willing because he believed that the Lord would keep his promise even if Isaac died. To say it another way, Abraham believed that the Lord would fulfill his Word through the resurrection of the child of promise, Isaac, who was type and shadow of the Savior to come, the last and genuine Child of promise. In other words: Abraham believed the Gospel. In order to fulfill his promise to save lost mankind, God the Father would have to do to his Son what he did not require of Abraham. The Son was equally willing. He offered his sinless life as a sacrifice of atonement. And God kept his Word to restore all things by raising him from the dead.

But that was last week. Today's text takes us back about fourteen years earlier in Abraham's life, to a point at which he wasn't displaying the marvelous faith he's so famous for. Oh, he has faith, to be sure; the trouble is that it's faith that's placed in something other than the Word and promises of God. That's never a good thing. Indeed, it's the main problem of the sinful condition that we trust in things other than the Lord. That's idolatry.

To understand we have to back up even farther in the patriarch's life another fifteen or so years. Abram (his name was shorter then) had been called by the Lord to leave the land of the east where he'd lived his whole life. He was told to strike out west to a land the Lord would show him. The Lord promised to give that land to him and to his descendants who would be countless in number. Abram believed. He did what he was told. With his wife, Sarai, he moved to Canaan. And he saw that it was the rich land the Lord said it was. He settled down and waited for the rest of the promise to be fulfilled.

The trouble is that it didn't happen. Abram was already 75 years old when he was called. At 65 Sarai was his junior by ten years. She had always been barren – a source of deep sadness for both of them. Abram had hoped that the Lord's promise meant that her curse would soon be lifted, that she'd bear a son. But ten years after moving to Canaan still nothing.

Abram got himself in a deep funk. He felt that he had been deceived, that the Lord had let him down. He figured the only way for the Lord's promise to be fulfilled was for him to adopt someone. He settled on his head servant, a man named Eliezer of Damascus, who at the time was probably a father and grandfather many times over. Adopt him and the whole brood would

legally be Abram's descendants and heirs. Done. God's promise fulfilled. But Abram still felt cheated.

So the Lord came to him and asked why he was so depressed. Abram explained his solution to the problem – how he was going to fix the Lord's failure to follow through with Eliezer and a bit of legal fiction. The Lord told him, "No, this man will not be your heir. I'm going to give you a son from your own body." And then he told Abram to step outside into the night. He said, "Look up at the stars. Count them if you can. So shall your offspring be."

What follows are some of the sweetest words in the entire Scripture. It says, "Abram believed the Lord, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." The Lord counts righteous sinners who believe his Word. Why, a statement like that could have come from the pen of St. Paul or Martin Luther – but no, it's right here in the first book of Moses. Those other two only rediscovered what was always there and is, in fact, the overriding theme of the whole Bible.

Anyway, so now Abram's good to go. He believes. He goes back to waiting for the Lord to fulfill his Word. Several more years go by. And *still* nothing happens. No, that isn't true. Something does happen. Sarai experiences that change of life which happens to older women. Whatever hope the couple had of her becoming a mother ends. We can well imagine the couple's bitter disappointment.

This time it's Sarai who proposes a solution to the problem of the Lord's apparent failure. She has in her possession a young, nubile, and most likely very fertile servant girl named Hagar. She's Egyptian. Sarai proposes that Abram father a child by her. She's my servant. We could resort to a different sort of legal fiction that says her child is mine too. And the child would be "from your own body", just as the Lord had said. In that way we could see that God's promise is fulfilled.

We are not told how *reluctant* Abram was to engage in conjugal relations with this young woman; neither are we told how *enthusiastic* he was about agreeing to his wife's plan. What we are told is that he went along with it and that he was extremely pleased with the result. Hagar conceived and bore a son. They named him Ishmael, which means "God hears". And he was the pride and joy of Abram's life; and this for two reasons. First, there was pure delight of being the father of a fine strapping son raised to immense heights by first having suffered so many years of bitter disappointment. But secondly, and more importantly for the story, Ishmael was to Abram tangible proof that the Lord's promise was being fulfilled. "Now I can see the Lord doing it for me. It's happening. The only thing the Lord needed was a little help on my part to get it done."

This is Abram's faith and state of mind for the next thirteen years. In that time it's safe to assume that his love for Ishmael and his confidence in him only grew. And now that the lad is approaching puberty, Abram can see that it won't be too much longer until he is capable of fathering children of his own. He pictures himself in the not-too-distant future with a great brood of grandchildren gathered around him. He hopes soon to see even more tangible proof of God's promise to make of him a great nation fulfilled.

It's likely that Abram was dwelling on such happy images when the Lord comes to him in today's text. Abram is ninety-nine. The Lord appears to him and says, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless." Two things to point out here. First, the Lord identifies himself as "almighty". He's emphasizing his absolute power. He can do whatever he wants to

do. Nothing is impossible for him. Create it. Change it. Destroy it. Recreate it. He can do it. If you tell him something can't be done, he can prove you wrong.

Second, he calls upon Abram to walk before him blamelessly. That means without sin, in perfect righteousness. And you might think that's impossible. You've heard many times from preachers such as myself that sinners are incapable of doing anything but sin. And that's true. Attaining sinless perfection and righteousness is far beyond human reach – as high as the heaven is above the earth. There is no way for Abram to walk before the Lord blamelessly—*on his own*.

But that's the point. We've already seen that Abram is *counted* righteous when he trusts the Word and promises of God. And he hasn't been doing that. No, for the past thirteen years he's been trusting in what he did – that which he was able to produce with his own natural power of reproduction. He's trusting in that little bit of help he contributed because he thought the Lord needed his assistance to get the job done. And because he is trusting in what he did, he has made a god of himself. He's practicing self idolatry. And we do the same thing whenever we place our trust and hope of salvation however slightly in anything we say or do or even think we might contribute.

The Lord doesn't need our help. He makes his promises to us, and with his almighty power he does what he says. Our part is simply to believe. And even that ability to believe is a gift of God worked in us by the Holy Spirit and the power of his Word.

And that's what we see in the text. The Lord had promised to make of Abram a great nation. Abram's faith in that promise failed. So now, instead of repeating the promise, the Lord vastly ups the ante. He makes a bigger promise. I'm changing your name from Abram (which means "exalted father) to Abraham (which means "father of many peoples"). "I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you."

It's good that we note Abraham's posture as the Lord says all this. He is face down on the ground emphasizing his powerlessness. He's got nothing. All he does is to receive what the Lord gives. And he isn't done giving. He goes on to bless Abraham's wife as well. He changes her name from Sarai (which means "contentious" – a rather unfortunate name for a woman) to Sarah (which means "princess" – that's much nicer). And the Lord says, "I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings shall come from her."

We know how the story comes out, so it may be hard for us to appreciate just how difficult it would be for Abraham to believe that. He and Sarah had been married for seventy years or more. In all her years of potential fertility, she never once had shown any sign of having conceived. And now she's decades past those years of fertility. A little bit later in the text, it strongly suggests that age has caught up with Abraham himself in such a way that he is no longer capable of being sexually active. So he's got two very good reasons to doubt that he could father a child by Sarah. With regard to procreation as a couple they were both dead.

But God brings life to the dead. In those dead in sin and unbelief, he creates faith that he counts as righteousness. In those who have no power to do what is right in his sight, he creates love that gladly serves others. And in those who are dead in their graves he will one day replace the spirit they gave up and he will raise them in bodies that will never die again.

He does it all. His strength is displayed in our weakness. That's the main message of this text. The Lord waits until Abraham and Sarah have given up all hope in themselves of fulfilling the promise in order to highlight the truth that he does it all, and he can be counted upon to keep his Word.

As I'm sure you know, Sarah did conceive and bear a son. Through that son both Abraham and Sarah became the parents of many nations. And kings came from them – most importantly he who is the King of kings and Lord of lords. And we are counted the righteous children of Abraham and Sarah when we believe in him and what he did to save us by his suffering, death, and resurrection. Therefore, despairing of ourselves and our abilities and deeds, let us trust in him whose strength is displayed in our weakness in life, through death, unto life eternal. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!