

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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First Sunday in Advent, December 3, 2017

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 56, 275:5-6, 40, 91:1-4, 536:6.

Lessons: Genesis 11: 27-12:9, Hebrews 11: 1 and 8-19, Matthew 1: 1-25.

Sermon Text: Genesis 12: 1-3.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehltrittter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Advent is a time to look at some of the Old Testament passages foretelling the coming of the Savior. Today in Genesis we hear a prophecy of the coming Savior from sin. The very first promise of a Savior came just after mankind sinned: To Satan God said ***“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”*** Genesis 3:15. Eve, trusting in God’s promise, thought at the birth of her first son she had received a Savior. But it wasn’t to be. That firstborn son proved to be a murderer. About ten generations later God sent a terrible flood that wiped out the population of the entire earth except for 8 people. And about ten generations after that that God gave more information about his promise of a Savior and made it clear that the family, or clan, or genealogy from whom the Savior would be born would be from a man called Abram, whose name was later changed to Abraham. Today we hear that

ABRAM IS GIVEN THE PROMISE

- 1. The command that came with the promise.**
- 2. The promise.**
- 3. The conclusion of that promise.**

God was very specific about what Abram was to do. ***“Leave your country.”*** Abram was to pull up stakes and go to the land that God would show him. He left most of his family. His childless wife and his nephew Lot and his wife were the only family members who went with him. Abram had been quite wealthy, for he took all the possessions and servants they had acquired in Haran and set out without even having a complete roadmap. We today may make such a trip, without knowing exactly where we are going, but we always plan to come back to our homes. Here is God telling this man to go, without even telling him where they were going. Today the land they left is barren desert land. But not all land in the Middle East has always been dry desert land. For example, the land where God finally told Abram that ***“this land will belong to your descendants”*** was a very fertile land in Abram’s time and for centuries afterward. Historians tell us that it was at the time of the Crusades that trees were cut down in Canaan resulting in the fertile topsoil being eroded away leaving the barren land we now see in Israel and the homelands of the Palestinians. In recent decades some attempts have been made to make the land grow good crops, but it is nowhere near as lush as it was in the time of Abram and in the time of Moses. But Abram didn’t know exactly where they were going at the time of this first promise.

Look at the promises God gives him: ***“I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.*** And finally we look at these words: ***“all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”***

He ended up taking just a few people: his wife Sarai, later called Sarah, and his nephew Lot and his wife, together with all their servants and possessions. But to be told he would become a great nation? He is the childless 75-year old husband of a barren 65-year old woman and he heard God say: ***“I will make you into a great nation.”*** Wow, that would take a lot of faith. You are leaving all your relatives. You do not know where

you are going to end up. You don't have any children, only servants. And God is telling you that you will become a great nation? That takes a lot of faith to believe those promises. No wonder Moses wrote three chapters later: "***Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.***" Genesis 15: 6 and St. Paul echoes: "***What does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.'***" Romans 4:3.

His sinful flesh may have wanted to think "A man my age should pull up all his roots and start a new life?" But God assured Abram: "***I will bless you.***" God would not only pour blessings into Abram's own life; he would use him to bless countless other people. "***All peoples on earth will be blessed through you.***"

God chose Abram to become the father of a new nation, the nation of Israel, which was named after his grandson Jacob, who was also called Israel. This was the nation which would give birth to the Savior. But there is a second reason why Abram gets so much attention in both Old and New Testaments. The way God dealt with Abram is typical of the way God deals with every sinner. The better we understand how God spoke to Abram the better we will understand what God has to say to a world of sinners today, including us ourselves. God called Abram to believe in him, and to follow what he said. God calls every believer out of the darkness of sin. Just like Abram we don't decide to go somewhere or do something by ourselves. We follow the Word of God, now all written down for our learning. Peter tells us about that calling in this way: "***But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.***" 1 Peter 2:9-10. Not only could those words apply to this 75-year-old man, but they apply to every one of us who believes that Jesus Christ paid the price for our sins. Jesus died to redeem us; he was crucified to save us; and he rose from the dead to give us everlasting life.

The greatest blessing God held out before Abram when he called him was: "***all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.***" During his lifetime, about ten generations after the great flood, the unfaithfulness of the people of the world could threaten once again to plunge the whole human race into spiritual darkness, but the love of God took the initiative to guarantee that would not happen. God promised Abram that a great Descendant would be born to his family who would bring blessings to every member of the human race.

We are in the season of the year when the results of that promise are celebrated. Jesus Christ is that descendant. Jesus Christ is the great blessing that, through Abram and his descendants, would be given to the world. In the Magnificat, the song of Mary when she learned she was to be the mother of the Savior, we read "[God] ***has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers.***" Luke 1:54-55.

God told Abram "***I will make your name great.***" At the time of his calling Abram had the reputation of being a well-to-do herdsman. So he already had a great name among the peoples who knew him. But that isn't the reputation Abram has on the pages of the Scriptures. He is called the friend of God; he is the called a father of believers; he is the father of the Israelite nation; he is an ancestor of the Messiah. Blessings would be identified with Abram.

Abram would experience opposition as, for the last century of his life, he lived as a wandering nomad in lands belonging to others. But God promised him he would be so closely identified with the work of God that to curse him, to despise him, would be just like opposing God.

The important thing to remember about these promises to Abram is that they all centered in Christ. Everything that God told Abram about his large family of descendants or about the new homeland they would inherit gets its real purpose and meaning from God's revelation centering in Christ. Abram understood this from what God told him. Jesus made this clear when he said: "***Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad***" John 8:58.

But it took a long time. Abram is found in scripture about 20 generations after creation. Of course, mankind lived much longer before we degenerated to live 60 or 70 or 80 or so pain-filled years. Many in those first 20 generations of the human race lived to be hundreds of years old.

God promised him he would become a great nation. Eventually his family grew, but slowly. It took 25 years from the time of this promise in our text before Abram had even one son, whom he named Isaac. No

wonder we read God's promise – and Abram's response – three chapters later: *“the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: ‘Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.’ But Abram said, ‘O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?’ And Abram said, ‘You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.’ Then the word of the LORD came to him: ‘This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir.’ He took him outside and said, ‘Look up at the heavens and count the stars--if indeed you can count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’ Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”* Genesis 15:1-6.

Abram was saved not by some kind of generic faith in a generic homogenized god who is called by many different names depending on your ancestral religion. He was saved by faith in a Person, and only by faith in a Person, and only by faith in one Person – Jesus Christ. He was saved by faith in the true God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. He was saved by faith in the triune God who sent Jesus Christ into the world to save sinners. And that's what makes the scriptural record of Abram so important. The way Abram was saved is the same way sinners are saved today. God didn't have one way for people of Old Testament times to enter his family and a different way for us of the New Testament period. There has always been only one way: to believe God's promises as they are centered in Jesus Christ.

In Matthew's record of the genealogy of Jesus, we find Abraham listed first. But it took 42 generations from Abraham to Jesus according to that record before the Savior was born. And you can be sure that there were believers in every one of those 42 generations who were hoping: Now? In our generation? Will the Savior from sin be born now? God kept refining his promises and his prophecies.

God gave his directions to the birth and circumstances and all the grand things the Savior would do one prophecy at a time, always emphasizing the biggest promise, the greatest prophecy: He shall save his people from their sins. We think about the sign at the gas station in Mankato that gives away free ice water, just like Wall Drug in Wall, SD. In Mankato you learn that Wall is 439 miles away. And the closer you get to Wall Drug, the more their signs tell you about Wall Drug. And the signs get much more specific the closer you get. God didn't give the entire roadmap to the birth of the Savior all at one time like you can find on the internet at MapQuest that instantly gives you mile-by-mile directions for the entire way. He revealed it word-by-word, generation-by-generation in the scriptures and his people, Abram's descendants, often lost their way and forgot about God and the Redeemer he promised. And when the Savior did come, they by and large didn't believe that this Jesus born in Bethlehem was the promised Redeemer.

It took a long time for the promises to Abram that *“all peoples on earth will be blessed through you”* to be fulfilled. But at God's right time, at the right time in history – His Story – it happened in a nowhere place called Bethlehem, the city of David, who himself was a descendant of Abram. *“But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.”* Galatians 4:4-5.

Thousands and thousands of descendants of Abram had to be born and die before Jesus Christ was born, a descendant of Abram and the very Son of God. So we actually find Jesus as the conclusion, the apex, the high point of the tribe that would come from Abraham. So in a sense the Old Testament is not only the history of the world, but it is also the history of Abram's people. It is the history of the chosen people of God. And you – you have the whole picture, the rest of the story right in front of you – all in the printed Bible! What a blessing that we can sing “Abram's promised great Reward, Zion's Helper, Jacob's Lord – Him of two-fold race behold – Truly came, as long foretold. Welcome, O my Savior, Now! Hail! My Portion, Lord, art Thou. Here, too, in my heart, I pray, Oh, prepare Thyself a way!” Amen. (The Lutheran Hymnal, 91: 3-4.)