

Have Faith...God is Our Shield

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I am sure that you have noticed from the readings for this ninth Sunday in Pentecost, that the focus is on faith. The problem for many people is the definition of faith. What is it? We can't see it or touch it. We all want to have it but how can we get it? How do we make it strong? Where do we keep it?

The reading from Hebrews today answers some of those questions. It reads, ***"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."*** So we hear that faith and hope go together. We learn that faith is trust or confidence in things yet to come. Things in the future. We still don't have a good definition of faith. We only have descriptions of faith. The dictionary definition I found was: *"unquestioning belief"* and *"complete trust, confidence, or reliance."* One thing is certain, to have faith, there must be someone or something in which we place our trust, confidence, and reliance.

If trust and confidence are the meaning of faith, then the opposite of faith is fear, anxiety, doubt, and worry. Is there anyone here today who doesn't suffer from fear, anxiety, doubt, or worry?

In our world today, we are facing devastating threats from climate change. There is a war in Europe that threatens to drag us into yet another continental blood bath. The economy is either in inflation or recession depending on which economist is speaking to you. We are still threatened by the COVID-19 virus but the Monkey Pox virus is gaining momentum. China is threatening Taiwan. School is about to start – new teachers, new classes, new clothes, maybe new classmates. The weather is unusually hot and humid and the storms are more and more ferocious. In some places, there is too much rain resulting in flooding. In other places, there is not enough rain resulting in drought and wildfires. Deaths at the hands of people with guns have increased into another epidemic.

Political strife threatens the peace and stability of our nation and its political order. Social Security is running out of funds. The church isn't as full as it used to be and those who are attending are generally not young. The budget for the church is suffering. Did I miss anything? Oh, yes, our call was turned down. We have a lot to fret about. To worry about. To be anxious about.

The reading from Genesis begins today with God saying to Abram, ***"Fear not. I am your shield, your reward shall be great."*** It seems Abram was afraid and worried too. Why was Abram afraid? For the answer to that question, we are guided by the first words in the reading: ***"After these things..."*** which point us to what had happened to Abram in chapters 12-14. In chapter 12, Abram, a pagan, is traveling with his father, Terah, from Ur of the Chaldeans, in what is now Iraq, to the land of Canaan. About halfway on this 1,300-mile trek, Abram's father, Terah, died in a place called Haran which is in northeastern Turkey. Abram was now left alone with his nephew Lot, all his family, and all his belongings in a foreign country. But, at Haran, God appeared to Abram and told him to go to an unspecified location in Canaan. And then, God promised Abram, who was 75 years old, that he would be the father of a nation and would be blessed. Abram accepted the will of God and continued on the journey. He ended up in the hostile land of Canaanites as an immigrant. Once in this foreign and hostile land, a famine broke out. Abram and his wife, Sarai, fled from this place where God has directed them to go and went south to Egypt. God showed mercy to Abram for his disobedience and, after a confrontation between the Pharaoh of Egypt and Abram over Sarai, they returned to Canaan. In Chapter 13, we read that Abram remained faithful to his new God and he prospered. He and his nephew, Lot, become so prosperous they are forced to separate because they had accumulated so many possessions and so much livestock. Their flocks were competing with each other for pasture and water. The land simply could not support both of them. So, they parted ways. Lot chose to settle in the plains in a fertile valley near the city of Sodom. Abram settled in a mountainous region. Because Lot chose the better lands, he

encroached on the lands of other people who saw it as theirs and not this immigrant Babylonian. In chapter 14, we learn a war broke out between a coalition of five kings from several local city-states in the region and another coalition of four kings. The City of Sodom, where Lot had settled, was attacked and captured. All the inhabitants were taken prisoner along with all their possessions, including Lot and his family and all his possessions. Abram heard about Lot's dilemma. He recruited 318 men and attacked the hostile army of the four kings led by King Chedorlaomer. He rescued Lot and his family and all of the kidnapped people from the five cities defeated by the warring kings and their armies. He recovered all of their possessions and recovered significant spoils of war. The booty was great.

His actions made Abram wealthier than he had been before the war, but this wealth posed a dilemma for Abram. He had no children to whom he could pass his wealth. So, he delivered the once defeated people back to their cities and gave all of their possessions back. The grateful people wanted to reward Abram but he said, ***"No. My reward is that the Lord has given us the victory."*** This pagan Babylonian has now become a believer in God. Then, Abram gave one-tenth of the loot he had captured to a priest of the Lord, Melchizedek, and received a blessing as God had told him in Haran.

That brings us to this reading and two very important issues that arose as a result of all these events. First, Abram was an alien in the land that God had promised him. King Chedorlaomer, who he had defeated was still alive and well. It was typical in that day for a defeated enemy to retaliate for their loss and Abram found himself totally vulnerable. Abram did not possess the land that God had promised him and had no place of his own to hide. He was worried and full of anxiety. Even with great wealth, he was not secure. And, although he had tremendous wealth, Abram did not have an heir as God had promised him. What was he to do with all this great wealth which came from his obedience to God? Who would inherit it should he die? Who would take care of Sarah and him in their old age? More anxiety and worry.

Chapter 15, of our text for today, begins with God coming to Abram in a dream and saying, **"Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward."** Abram had just defeated four marauding kings. He had emerged victorious. He had graciously returned all the captives to their homes. Yet, Abram was full of fear, anxiety, and worry. By his faith in God, Abram had acquired great wealth and great prestige. Yet, despite all this, he was still fearful. God knew that Abram was troubled. So, He came to Abram and told him not to worry. He told Abram to have faith in Him, as his God, and He would be his protection, his shield. God offered him comfort and relief from his worries and anxieties. Even though an enemy king might still be plotting against him and he had no heir for his immense wealth, God was offering Abram the solace of His might and power.

God added, **"...your reward shall be very great."** Even with the promise of His protection, God knew, that in Abram's heart, there was still something bothering him. Somehow, with the reassurance of protection Abram had not heard the promise of reward. For some reason, Abram only heard part of the Word of God. The part about protection. He seems to have missed the part about the reward. Or maybe he simply didn't understand. We see this in his response to God's generous offer.

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?"** God must have been shocked. **"What can you give me?"** God had just given him a great victory. God had given Abram the opportunity to restore people to their rightful places. God had just given him the promise of protection. But Abram was still asking what God could do for him. He did not see the great blessings God had given him. We, too, often respond as Abram and ignore the many blessings we have been given only to ask more of God. And Abram didn't see the future. In fact, he had forgotten the promise from back in Haran that God would give him regarding children.

Even with the blessings of all God has done for him, Abram was still worried that he had no heirs. He blurted out, ***“But Eliezer is going to inherit my estate.”*** This worry of Abram’s was so profound that Abram repeated his concern again when he said, ***“You have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.”*** Abram believed that he would have to adopt a household servant and grant him the right to inherit his wealth. This was a common practice among the Babylonians. And, strangely, even if a natural heir was born later, the adopted non-blood heir was considered the rightful heir over the natural born heir. Abram was stressed and anxious.

But a gracious and faithful God assured him. God said that this non-biological man would not be his heir. Abram would have a natural-born son, a true heir, and son of Abram and his wife, Sarai. This was the third occasion that God made this promise to Abram. The first was in Haran; the second, after he saved Lot, and now, a third time. On the second occasion of the second promise, God told Abram that his offspring would be as numerous as the dust of the earth. At this third time of the promise, God told Abram his offspring would be as numerous as the stars in heaven. And notice the words of God’s promise to Abram. God doesn’t have Abram check out a particular constellation and say, you’ll have as many descendants as there are stars in that little grouping. Instead, God tells that all the stars in the whole sky are representative of the heirs of Abram. God even invites Abram to go out and try to count the stars in the sky. With our sophisticated telescopes today, we are still counting the stars in the sky. Abram would have that many descendants. Isn’t it interesting that in His first announcement in Haran, God used the dust of the earth as the illustration for the number of heirs Abram would have? The dust of the earth was what God used when He created Adam and Eve originally. But, in the second instance, God used the stars in the sky to represent the heirs of Abram. If the heirs of Abram were the children of men who were faithful to God on earth, then, might the stars in the sky represent the saints of God who were the heirs of God to eternal and everlasting life? Abram’s heirs

would be his human children who in the future would be God's children in heaven.

The last words of our reading today are some of the most powerful and significant of the Bible. We read when Abram heard the Word of God, he believed and God granted him righteousness for his faith. Abram trusted the Word of God. He had faith in God and as a result, God declared Abram to be perfectly just and holy in His eyes. By his faith in the Word of God Abram granted him salvation. Abram did nothing more than believe in the God who was speaking to him. His "reward" was not only the fulfillment of the promises that God had made to him on earth but also the hope of everlasting spiritual life in heaven. This is the very heart of our Lutheran doctrine - Justification by faith.

We hear this repeated in the reading from Hebrews today. In that reading, great heroes of faith trusted in God and believed in His promises. Abel believed that his sacrifice was acceptable and as a result was the first human to die for his faith. Enoch walked in faith to God all his life and was taken into heaven by God without dying. Noah acted in faith and built an ark facing cruel and intense derision and mockery for his faith. All, trusted in God as their shield. All believed in the promises of God. All of them kept their faith. All of them believed in things that the Word of God told them. They could not see what was to come. They only believed what had been promised to them by God. They trusted in God.

St. Paul writes in Romans 4:1, ***"For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith."*** The Law of God would not be given by God to Moses for 600 years from this time. Abram, Abel, and Noah did not know about Jesus. They did not know the great plan of salvation that was being developed by God through the nation that was to come from Abram. They did not know of the great act of salvation which would be theirs, and ours, through the heir of God, His Son, our Savior, Jesus. These ancient believers could only accept the Word of God and by their faith believe in the things which were to come in the future,

a future which they could not see. They trusted in God. They allowed God to be their shield in this world. Their faith earned them a place in the Hall of Heroes of Faith. They received the reward of heaven according to the words written in Hebrews.

You and I live in a world that is no different than these great heroes of faith. But we do know what they did not. A promise of salvation would come in Jesus. A promise that by the grace of God through the power of faith by the power of the Holy Spirit, we too would be justified by our faith in Jesus. The land which Abram was to receive, the Promised Land, eventually was given to his heirs. The promise of heaven was also given to him and all his heirs who believed in God. We are heirs to that promise as well. But we are heirs to other things, to the gift of faith through the waters of Holy Baptism, to the promise of forgiveness in the words of Absolution, to the saving grace in the body and blood of our Lord and Savior, Jesus, in, with, and under the bread and wine of His Holy Supper. We cannot “see” faith but we can experience it. Like Abram, we did nothing to earn faith, it is a gift from God. Like Abram before us, we often falter and misstep by not trusting in God. But a loving and faithful God grants us the gifts of His mercy, grace, and forgiveness – justification through faith and a promise of the “*land of heaven*” with Him.

I do not know what is worrying you today. Maybe it is your health, your kids, your job, bills, your parents, your neighbors, your future, or your sins. God comes to you today and says, “**Fear not.**” (The same words are echoed in the Gospel reading this morning by Jesus.) No matter what you are worrying about today. No matter your anxiety. No matter your fears. In faith, trust in God. Listen to His Word to you. Put your worries and fears in His hands. He has promised to protect you, sustain you, bless you, and keep you because He loves you as His heir and child. He promises to bring you and I home to Him from this hostile world where the devil lurks to retaliate for his defeat at the hands of Jesus. Faith in the Word of God is powerful and brings blessing. Look at all the blessings that you have received from God and marvel at His generosity. This story of Abram can be our story too.

As I prepared these words, I remembered a slogan from a not-so-politically correct magazine I used to read as a teenager. The name of the magazine was *"Mad"* and the slogan was: *"What, me worry?"* You may remember that slogan too. It is not so preposterous for us as God's people to use that as our motto. Following in the footsteps of our ancient Father Abram, we need to let God be our GPS and give Him the steering wheel as we navigate the road of our life. God has made promises to you and to me and He will keep them. God has shown us that He is true to His Word and He keeps all the promises He makes. We only need to have faith in Him and His Word. He will do what He says. He did so for Aram and He will for us.

To the glory of His name and with full faith in His Word. Amen.