

“Justified by Faith”

March 16, 2025

First Christian Church

Scripture Text: Genesis 15:1-6

There are so many incredible stories from the Old Testament that helped shape the New Testament: stories of creation, the fall, the exodus, Psalm 23, Isaiah’s suffering servant, the sacrificial system as a whole, prophets like Amos and Micah’s call for justice over lip service; but perhaps none has been more influential than today’s passage, especially for Paul. Yet when we read it in context as opposed to just pulling out one verse, it shares even more.

Abram, whose name will later be changed to Abraham (so please forgive me if I occasionally flip back and forth between the two names – they are the same person), Abram and God have just pulled off a major victory. A regional scuffle was reactivated which came to a head as 9 city-state kings and their armies met on the battlefield, 5 against 4, and the 4 won. And because of their victory, they got to basically take whatever they wanted from the 5 losing city-states including livestock, goods and people. As a result, Abram’s nephew Lot, his family, and all his possessions were taken as spoils of war. That didn’t sit well with Abram, so he gathered his people along with 3 friends and their people to make it right. 318 men against 4 kings and their battle hardened, experienced soldiers who had already proved their valor on the battlefield – and Abram won. That meant Abram was now the owner of everything of value from the original 5 kingdoms – their livestock, goods and people. They were his by rights of military conquest. But Abram sent all he was entitled to – the people and their stuff – home. Abram recognized this victory was because of God – because of God’s promise to bless those who blessed Abram and curse those who cursed him. And Abram wanted everyone to know he didn’t get rich off of them. It was all God. That day Abram became both feared for his power and respected for his principles, and God came to congratulate him. God was so pleased Abram not only trusted God to fulfill God’s promises, but he shared with others about those promises so that they could know the one true God. It was a good day.

But then things took a turn. God had come to congratulate and celebrate with Abram for what they had accomplished together, but just when God was about to put on the dance music, Abram put on the brakes. “God, I am grateful for everything you have done for me. You have taken a nobody, trapped in a dead-end life, and brought me wealth and influence. I am grateful, but you promised me descendants. It has been 10 years since you promised us a child, and there is no evidence that is happening. I’m old, around 85 years old, and not getting any younger. All this stuff is good, but without anyone to pass it onto, it pales. I am grateful, but a slave boy in my house is going to inherit everything I have, and you promised descendants. Can you actually do that? You have proved You have some control over wealth and even military battles, but bringing life into the world? Can You do that? You promised, but can You do that?”

I'm not seeing it." That is when (starting in verse 5) God "brought him outside and said, 'Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then God said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' And Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness."

Two miracles there. First, "and Abram believed the Lord." The Scripture lesson begins with Abram looking at the evidence which surrounds him every day. He has no child. Both he and his wife Sarai are old and getting older. There is no evidence of change in his childless situation. He has heard God's promises before, multiple times, but nothing has changed in that department. Then God speaks the promise again. No new sign, no sensation in his loins, no extra twinkle in Sarai's eye. No proof, no persuasive argument, no logical inference. He went outside and looked at the stars that he has looked at thousands of times before; and Abram believes. Abram believes God over and above all the evidence which surrounds him every day. It is the gracious miracle of a faith God alone can plant into our hearts. He believes God's word, God's promise even though every shred of evidence says it is impossible and not going to happen – yet he believes. The miracle of faith. I am so thankful for it.

The second miracle is "and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness." Like I said, this is perhaps the most important single line in the Old Testament as far as the New Testament is concerned – especially for Paul. What happened here is Abram repented. What I mean by that is Abram changed from believing the evidence that surrounded him everyday; like the fact that he and his wife had come into, passed through, and are now leaving the childbearing years, but still no children. Abram turned away from believing the evidence surrounding him every day and what he knew was true, and instead, believed God's promises. That is repentance. "And the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness."

Now was Abram righteous? Was he holy and perfect in everything he did and everything he said? No, not even close. For example, he had a habit of pawning his wife off as his sister so he could get a good bride price for her and put himself in a favorable position with the local powers that be. One time he did it in Egypt and married Sarai off to the Pharaoh. God had to step in and bring plagues and disease to Pharaoh's house to keep Sarai safe. Marrying your wife off to another man so you can get rich and find favor with the locals is not exactly righteous. Your greed causing God to bring plagues and disease upon a people who were hosting you in your time of need is not listed in the annals of righteous living. Abram was not a righteous man, but his belief and trust in God against all evidence was more impressive to God than his selfish greed, so God counted it as righteousness and took Abram as His own.

That is us with God. When we repent and believe the promise of Jesus above all the evidence that surrounds us everyday, God counts that as righteousness. Not that we aren't just as selfish and greedy as Abram, or even more so; but when we repent from believing the evidence that

surrounds us and believe the promise of God that is above us, God counts it as righteousness. We use the term saved by grace through faith. It is the core of the protestant reformation that birthed all the churches in town except St. Joseph Roman Catholic church. It is the foundation of Paul's theology – the man who's work defined New Testament content and shaped Christianity in a way that is second only to Jesus Himself. Paul wrote Romans 5:1-2, "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand." And Ephesians 2:8-9, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works."

Believing the promises of God over the evidence and circumstances that surround us is who we are and what we do. It looks like loving God and loving neighbor even when God has been silent and our neighbor doesn't deserve it. It looks like what we talked about a couple week ago, responding to others like God is in the room and God's presence has more influence on our behavior than anyone else's. It looks like treating others as you want to be treated, as opposed to how they treat you. It looks like sharing acts of kindness and love with your enemies while they are still your enemy. It is repenting from believing and responding to the evidence that surrounds you every day, to believing and responding to the promises of God.

It is who we are and what we do. And today we remember something else too. This moment came in the midst of a battle – a battle between faith and doubt. God helped bring a great military victory which bolstered Abram's faith and confidence. But God promised descendants, and Abram still had no child. He doubted if God could bring life to their barrenness. And right after this great miracle of faith, Abram doubts again if God can give him land. God's bringing victory in battle is not a defining moment. It is just a glimmer of hope into the darkness of Abram's pain and doubt. Maybe that is why God had him go outside and look up at the night sky. For there he saw his life. Darkness. Overwhelming darkness that seemed to go on forever. Yet in that darkness, a little star light fought through. God broke through the darkness with little dots of light that came together and lit up the night sky, just to let us know darkness doesn't get the final word. We get that, because death, but life comes out of death. Easter comes from Good Friday. God's resurrection comes after the suffering and the physical breakdown wins. Out of the darkness comes the glimmer of light that changes everything. Those little dots of light are Abram's descendants, God's promises which break through the darkness. Those little dots of light are belief poking through the questions, trust battling through the doubt, the invitation to believe God's promises in the midst of contrary evidence. Doubt doesn't negate faith. Faith calls most powerfully through the darkness. It invites you to believe and be made righteous.

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