

Unbelievable Promises

2nd Sun. in Lent – 02/25/24 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 Pastor Keith Besel

vv. 6-7, [God promised to Abram,] ⁶ “I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you.” ⁷ And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.”

Introduction

✘ So, I've got a question for you to start. Give me a show of hands: How many of you have ever taken a shortcut, either in doing something or going somewhere? Yeah, I think we all have taken a shortcut at one time or another. But, answer this: Did it work? Sometimes it might work, but all too often, shortcuts can end in disaster, right?

➔ If you're trying to avoid traffic, there is the dead-end road or the two-lane road filled with everyone else trying to do the same thing as you, so not only does it end up as no shortcut, but it actually makes your trip longer.

➔ And what about a shortcut when you're trying to fix something at home or on the car or even in a relationship? You think you have an “aha” experience, and then it breaks again, costing more to fix the problem the second time or making matters worse in the relationship! Shortcuts don't usually work. Many of us heard our parents or teachers or mentors say something like this when we were young, “If you're going to do it, do it right the first time.” And if you're like me, it took a few times or maybe a number of years of ignoring that advice, before it finally sank in, so that now you are actually saying it to a younger person – often to the same kind of rolling eyes that you first exhibited.

I. Abram (and Sarai) caught taking a shortcut

✘ As our Old Testament Reading leads us into an interaction between Abram and Yahweh, we find out that Abram actually wants to take a manmade shortcut. Right after our text, in verses 17-19 we see that Abram is 100-years-old and his wife Sarai is 90 without any children of their own by birth. “Obviously”, they know that it's not going to happen. It's too late. They have no heir.

➔ So, Abram has come up with a plan; a way that he can have an heir and God can still save face.

✘ You see, Abram already has a son – the result of Sarai's concocted plan 15 years earlier, when she had reached 75-years-old and believed she was beyond the age to have children. She gave one of her servants, Hagar, to Abram thinking that she could please him by providing this “work around” or “short cut” to giving Abram his much-desired heir. Hagar and Abram's son was named Ishmael.

➔ So Abram thinks, “Aha, Ishmael is already born. And I love Ishmael.” So he prays to God with a begging tone in verse 18, “Oh that Ishmael might live before You!” He's asking for God's approval to make Ishmael the heir of God's covenant promises in chapter 15, that Abram's offspring will be as many as the stars in the heaven (15:5-6).

➔ Now, before you and I hurt ourselves pointing an accusing finger at these two, are we sure we would be any different? I mean, human logic says those two are too old to have any children of their own. And Ishmael would be the “logical solution” in anyone's eyes, right?

- ✘ So, what's the problem with all of this? Well, what we see here is the result of a weak faith in both Abram and Sarai. They are allowing their understanding to have more authority than God's clear promise.
 - ➔ Abram doubts that God, who created the entire universe out of nothing, can still keep his promise and miraculously provide him with an heir. Everyone – every human that is, knows this would be impossible – too much to ask; too much to believe!
 - ➔ So, Abram takes matters into his own hands, just as Sarai had done 15 years earlier. Abram's a typical male; he's a "fixer". So he sets out to fix the problem. He thinks he's got the perfect solution. So he basically says, "Hey God, let's do things my way this time."
- ✘ Again, be careful with those judging tendencies that all of us as sinners have, because we all operate the same way.
 - ➔ When we face the problems in life that everyone faces, what do we do? Well, as people of God, we go to Him in prayer, of course. We pour out our hearts to God, begging for an answer; pleading for some kind of miracle. We tell Him we believe in His power and promises, right?
 - ➔ But almost as soon as we say, "Amen" you know what happens. We jump right into looking for and developing and acting on our own solutions; our own answers; the way we think the problem should be solved. And just as quickly, we find ourselves racked with worry, fear, and anxiety. It's as if we never really believed that the God we were praying to was listening or had the ability to address our problem at all. We "give it to God" and then we "take it right back" faster than you can bat an eye.
- ✘ So what's the real problem here? It's the same as it was with Abram and Sarai. We don't trust God and His ability to answer according to what He knows is best for us; what is according to His wisdom! You and I still want to be in charge. We want to do it, because after all, we may not like God's answer or God's solution. We're just like Abram!

II. God comes to Abram face-to-face

- ✘ So, as we understand from verse 22, right after our text that God came to Abram face-to-face. It says, "When [God] had finished talking with [Abraham], God went up from Abraham". This was a physical meeting of some type.
 - ➔ Yet God did not come to chastise or to condemn like most of us would have done if we were God. No, God comes to Abram to address and strengthen his faith by initiating and speaking to Abram the promises of God's covenant. If Abram thought it was impossible – unbelievable, that he and his wife could have a child in their old age, he was certainly astonished at the unbelievable promises that God proclaimed to him here.
- ✘ It started out with what most of us would think of as the more "doable" things. God simply changed Abram's name to Abraham. Why?
 - ➔ Because no longer would Abram be just an "exalted father", but God was making Him now to be the "father of a multitude of nations" (v.6). And Sarai, which means "princess" or "lady of one family" was now changed by God to be "Sarah" because she would be the "mother"; the "princess of many nations".
 - ➔ And in verse 19, after our text, God minces no words in His response to Abram's plea to work His promise through Ishmael. God says, "No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him."

- ⊗ You see, God was going to work two miracles. First, Abraham would have his own son, through his own wife Sarah. And second, God would make the family of Abraham very fruitful; making him literally into “a multitude of nations” (v.6).
 - This man who thought himself to be without any legitimate heir, was promised by God, in His unfathomable love and mercy, to be blessed with countless descendants, generation after generation.
 - In fact, God said His blessing for Abraham was an “everlasting covenant” (v.19).
 - And how would this be? All of it depended on just one of those descendants. We mere humans each have our own life expectancy with a beginning and an end. So for this to be an “everlasting covenant” it would require a special descendant; one who would be like Abraham in his human nature, but also like God, who has no end – who is everlasting. This unique and holy descendant, as we know, would be the promised Savior, Jesus Christ!
- ⊗ And finally, God promised to give to Abraham the land of Canaan, literally The Promised Land for his future descendants.
 - This Promised Land would also be an everlasting possession because this special land on earth would point all of mankind to a land far beyond any piece of land here on earth. It would be God’s land of promise; in eternity before God’s everlasting throne.

III. God fulfilled His promises in Jesus

- ⊗ And miracle of miracles; all praise be to God alone, He actually did fulfil His “unbelievable” promises to Abraham and Sarah. And, in doing so my dear friends, He has kept those same promises to you and to me today!
 - Abraham and Sarah’s blood-descendant, Jesus of Nazareth; born to the virgin Mary through a miraculous conception worked by the Holy Spirit, came as the long-promised Messiah.
- ⊗ He came into this world for all people; all nations; all generations. He came as the ultimate fulfillment of all of God’s promises. Why did Jesus come?
 - He came to remove the sins of our weak faith; of our doubts; of our constant desire to do things our way; of our sinful need to solve problems without regard to God’s will.
 - And how did He do that? By His own suffering; His own shed blood on the cross to cover our sins; His own physical death to pay for the wage – the guilt of our sin, and His own glorious resurrection to rob death of its sting and conquer it forevermore.
- ⊗ You see, Jesus’ saving work is how God’s promises to Abraham are fulfilled in you and me here and now, because, by faith in Jesus, God has made you and me to be His descendants; His children of Abraham.
 - And He has changed your name and mine as well. In the water and Word of our Baptism; on the day we received the Holy Spirit and all of our sins were washed away and forgiven; on that same day when you and I became heirs of eternal life, God gave all of us a new name: “Christian” – “one who follows and belongs to Christ”.
 - In fact it is there at the baptismal font, that God has kept Abraham’s promise to you; making you His beloved child and an heir of eternal life.
 - But that’s not all of God’s unbelievable blessing. Jesus, our Savior also feeds and strengthens us to face the troubles of this earthly life as He makes with us “a new covenant in His blood; given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins” in Holy Communion.

- ⊗ All of these are God's powerful; unbelievable works, sealed in Jesus' holy, precious blood to help us and keep us in the one true Christian faith into life everlasting.

Conclusion

- ⊗ It's all pretty unbelievable isn't it? God made His promises to Abraham; promises that seemed impossible; unbelievable, to an old man and his old barren wife.
 - ➔ Yet God kept His unbelievable promises not only to Abraham but to you and to me and to all of mankind!
 - ➔ He fulfilled every single promise in His Son, Jesus when He came and suffered and died and rose again for you and me.
 - ➔ And look at all that He has given us in those promises: we have new names; full and free forgiveness of sins; an everlasting covenant with the Creator of the universe; and a Promised Land of Paradise where there is no more pain or sorrow or hunger or tears – only joy and peace and the perfect presence of our God! These are indeed unbelievable promises – fulfilled for us all in Jesus! Amen.