

March 17, 2019
Lent 2 cc

In today's first lesson, how much do you relate to Abram?

His story of persistent hope is both simple and complicated. In his old age, Abram desperately wanted God to give him and Sarah the son that God had promised long ago. So Abram pestered God to keep his word right away.

Although our personal prayer lists may differ, how much is this story of hope your story too? How much is it the human story?

Hope is one of the forces that makes us human and keeps us going when we're afraid or in pain. We hope that we won't lose what we want to keep. We hope that we'll get what we want to have. We hope that our future will be better. Pain, fear, and hope drive us to do or not do so many things, sometimes wise, sometimes not.

One amazing thing about Abram is that he put his hope in a God who was waiting such a long time to deliver on his promises.

Some men would have turned to a substitute. Realistically, Sarah was very old, and Abram was even older. He could have sent her away and replaced her with somebody younger and more promising.

Or Abram could have decided that it was crazy to believe that these strange visions and voices really were from an actual God who could be trusted. Could he have checked out other Gods for a better deal? Could he have imagined that the real God was somewhere within himself?

Or Abram could have just given up on God's promise. Realistically, would you have advised a couple in their nineties to keep hoping that they would have a child?

Instead of clinging to God's promise, Abram could have replaced hope with whatever would have numbed his despair for a while.

When we're painfully discouraged, we may be very vulnerable when the tempter says things like these:

- ❖ "God's promises haven't been kept yet. So find another way to get what you want."
- ❖ Or "God's promises haven't been kept yet. So find another God to believe in, or believe most in yourself or in other people, or don't believe in anything at all."
- ❖ Or the tempter may say "God's promises haven't been kept yet. So give up and escape into whatever dulls your pain or gives you pleasure for the moment."

Now let's fast forward to today's Gospel lesson. Divine promises actually were kept in the life of Jesus, God the Son, God with us.

Jesus acted to free people from the ways that they foolishly had put their hopes in earthy power, in wealth, in achievements, or in other things that death destroys. Jesus acted to lead people to faith in God the Father. He acted to give hope to people who had every earthly reason to despair.

When Jesus came to Jerusalem, he encountered people who did not see that God's promises actually had taken human flesh right before their eyes. Their false hopes blinded them to the true God; and these false hopes hijacked their spirits, so they were not willing or not able to receive what Jesus offered.

This is what Paul wrote about in today's second lesson. He described some of the ways that people set their minds on "earthly things," rather than hope in Christ, who shall "bring everything under his control."

False hopes can block us from getting what we want most. It is so easy for us to be led astray, especially when we're afraid, in pain, and discouraged

That's what makes Abram's persistent faith so remarkable. Contrary to all appearances, Abram took God at his word.

But even in his belief, Abram asked God, "How can I know?" What a reasonable question that was.

God responded not with logical proof but rather by leading Abram into an act of worship. Abram sacrificed some of his herd, giving even more to the God who was making him wait.

This was a ritual of covenant between Abram and God. It made God's promises official, a little like signing a guaranteed contract. In this way, God inspired and strengthened Abram's faith.

As we, like Abram, wait for God to make good on his promises, he leads us now into acts of worship. God's Word teaches us what he actually does promise to us, so that his promises can shape our hopes, for what we want and what God promises aren't always the same thing. Just maybe, what God actually promises is best of all.

In Baptism, God makes a covenant with each of us as his very own sons and daughters, sends us his Holy Spirit, and gives us an eternal inheritance.

In Holy Communion, we celebrate the resurrection of our crucified Lord, and we receive an appetizer of his coming victory banquet, a banquet that we shall share when Jesus comes again in final triumph.

Word, Sacrament, and prayer are God's gifts to us in our weakness, given to strengthen our faith in times of pain, to sustain our hope in times of fear, and to channel divine love to us and through us, here and now.

I once knew a Bible teacher who said, "It's going to get worse before it gets worse." There's a lot in scripture to back that up. So does much of the daily news. Sometimes, our own personal lives do as well.

Although the forces of evil and death keep doing their worst, Abram's God promises that finally there shall be a new heaven and a new earth, where every tear shall be wiped away, where death shall be no more, and where righteousness shall have a home. Through Jesus, this new creation already has begun.

In spite of all appearances, God renewed his promises to Abram. By the power of these promises, Abram believed and obeyed. He lived according to his hope in God, and Abram finally saw the son that God had promised.

May the power of God's baptismal promises so inspire us that we also believe now and obey now, that we also live according to hope in our God now, and that we finally see the blessings that God the Son has promised to us.

Amen

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