

God of the Promises

Texts: Genesis 12:1-4a; Romans 4; John 3:1-17

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I have made promises to my children: I have promised that I will always love them no matter what happens in the future.

I have told them this many times and I want them to believe it, to know it, to trust it, and to live with that promise in their hearts. It's a promise that I know I will keep no matter what comes.

I have also promised them that if they are lost, I will never give up looking for them until I find them.

I want them to be prepared for whatever may come. In this dangerous age, it's just possible, though very unlikely, and may God forbid it, that they may one day be taken – see the things that parents think about! – and told that their parents don't care about them and aren't looking for them anymore. I read about a kidnapping some time ago where the kidnappers told the child just that, so the child wouldn't try to run away home. It wasn't a kidnapping for money, it was a child abduction by a childless couple.

Terrible things happen in the world– think of those poor women held prisoner for a decade right here in Cleveland! – and I want my kids to know that there will *always* be someone out there who is still looking for them, someone who still loves them and will always love them, someone who is coming for them to bring them home, no matter how long it takes.

I want them to know in their hearts that they are precious to me and that I will never give them up, never abandon them, never forsake them, never forget them, never stop looking for them.

I want them to know that, even after they are grown up, we will always be family forever.

I'm sure that Noah and Emily and Adam all know this. I hope they never have to use this information, but just in case. And they know it because I show them I love them all the time, I always come with them when they are scared, and I do my best not to let them down, even in small things.

We all know that promises can be broken, that promises are made all the time that the promiser has no intention of keeping, that the phrase "Promises, promises" shows no great faith in what is being said.

In this election season, promises are a dime a dozen, but an ad buy to share those promises with the world can cost a million dollars, easily.

But the promises of a good parent can be trusted. We all know that they will be kept no matter what. It's part of what parents do, love their children, part of who parents are, part of the relationship that parents have with their children. It's a promise that can be counted on.

It's heartbreaking if the parent has some sort of addiction or mental illness where this isn't true. Then, even more, a person needs the promises of God, who is forever reliable.

Today's lessons are all about a promise: the promise of God to Abraham.

The promise has three parts. The first is the promise of land: “Go from your country to the land I will show you.” This is the land that will be your land.

The second is the promise of offspring: “I will make you a great nation.” Later this is clarified to say that Abraham’s offspring will be as numerous as the stars in the sky.

And the third promise is that Abraham will bring a blessing to all the world: “In you all families of the earth shall be blessed.”

It has to be said that the promises require a great deal of faith in God. The land God promised to Abraham had people living in it – powerful people – much more powerful than Abraham, at any rate.

And, as Paul points out in our passage from Romans, Abraham had to face the fact that at a hundred years old his body was as good as dead – that he wasn’t exactly prime father material – and that his ninety year old wife Sarah was unlikely to be a mother any time soon – her time had passed!

A childless hundred year old man and a ninety year old woman have to have a lot of faith to believe that their offspring will be as numerous as the stars in the sky! They have to have a lot of faith to believe that their offspring will be as numerous as one!

You can see why Sarah laughed when God made that promise again in her hearing – and for that laugh, her son Isaac got his name, which means “laughter.”

The third promise, that all the families of the earth will be blessed through Abraham seems almost cruel, to speak of all the other *families* of the earth to a man who has no children and no prospect of children.

Yet Abraham believed God. As Paul says, “Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed.” It was hopeless in earthly terms, but with God in the picture, Abraham believed enough to at least have hope.

And Abraham had a child, and that child had a child, and on and on it went until one day a woman in the line of Abraham had a boy named Jesus, who would save the world, in whom all the families of the earth will be blessed.

Those families are blessed, not by following the Law, which came much later and didn’t even exist in Abraham’s time, as Paul pointed out, but by having a faith like Abraham’s faith, by hoping against hope that God would be able to fulfill God’s promises even though we are as good as dead, all of us.

If a nonagenarian and a centenarian can have a baby, well, maybe resurrection from the dead isn’t so outrageously impossible.

Paul says that people who put their trust in God become part of the family of Abraham. By faith we become the children of Abraham, that is, people who trust in the promises of God. By faith in God’s promises, we become people of the family of faith, whose head and source is Abraham himself.

That's what Paul is arguing in the letter to the Romans: that the true children of Abraham in God's sight are not just those who are descended from him in the flesh, who share some sort of genetic similarity to Abraham.

Rather, they are those who share Abraham's faith in God, who are like him in their trust in God's promises.

He's not arguing that we have to follow the Law or all the regulations the Bible records as coming from God. Abraham didn't get called righteous by following the Law. In the time of Abraham, there was no Law. It didn't come until much later.

And it wasn't Abraham's deeds that made him righteous before God. It was his trust in God's promises, and that faith in God was credited to him as righteousness. That is, he wasn't righteous on his own—Abraham makes some massive mistakes in his life—but his trust in God was counted as righteousness.

It's a bit like having a credit card that your parent pays on. It builds up your credit score, even though it's not your money paying for it! Your parent's paying the bill is credited to your creditworthiness.

We become children of Abraham by becoming people of faith, acting on the promises of God in hope, and living in the world as children of the promise. It's hard to act in the world on a promise. It means acting towards others as if the promise of God were already true, even though it isn't, yet.

In Jesus we find out that we can become even more than children of Abraham, though. We find out that we can be born again, born from above, that we can become as children of God, daring to call God Father.

This is what Jesus is trying to share with Nicodemus in that famous passage that brought us the born again movement. No, you don't have to go back into your mother's womb and be born again. But you do need to become a person of faith, a spiritual child of Abraham, trusting in the promises of God, with the help of God's Spirit, and start living your life again in a new way, acting as if the promise of eternal life in Jesus Christ were true, and acting as if you were apart of the kingdom of God, which isn't here yet..

In Jesus Christ, we are born again, born from above, born through faith and through the Spirit, and we become children of Abraham's faith family, we become children of God.

And when we become children of God through Jesus Christ, the last promise to Abraham is fulfilled: that all the families of the earth will be blessed by him.

The promises of God our Parent to us are no less than the promises that I have made to my children: that God will never stop loving us, no matter what comes; that God will never stop looking for us when we are lost; that God wants us to be family forever.

God wants us to know that promise in our hearts, to trust it, to feel it, to live with it every day. God wants us to be embraced by the promise, comforted by it, healed by it, restored by it, changed by it,

God wants us to grow up into that promise, to mature as people of faith by trusting it.

In this time of Lent, let us be children of Abraham through faith in God's promises. Let us be born again as children of God through faith in Jesus Christ. Let us hope against hope that all that God says is true, that we are forever loved from first to last, that we shall be found again when we are lost, that we shall be family with God forever.

The last word goes to Paul again, who tells us in 2 Corinthians (1:20):
"No matter how many promises God has made, they are all 'Yes' to us in Christ."

Amen