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Pentecost 19 – Genesis 15:1-6 – Believe the Word of the LORD

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Three times already in this service you’ve heard me say, “This is the Word of our Lord.” That’s how we typically end each Scripture reading, but while we might say that phrase enough that we maybe don’t even notice it anymore, we say it – or rather, we *declare* it – for a good reason. It’s not just some pious, liturgical way of saying that the reading is over now. No, it means something significant. It means this isn’t just some inspirational quote. It isn’t Shakespeare, or some ancient epic poem like the Iliad or the Odyssey or the Aeneid, or even Harry Potter or The Hunger Games or whatever else is really popular right now. This is not the word of man. This is the Word of the Lord, and that means this is truth, this is power, this is life. This is the Word of our Creator and Savior, so what can we possibly do but gratefully listen and believe?

Well what’s true for us was also true for Abram in our Old Testament lesson for today. Maybe you didn’t catch this, but twice it said, “The Word of the LORD came” to Abram. To a man who was overcome by worry and fear and anxiety came the true Word of the true God, who never lies and whose promises never fail, whose Word has power to accomplish its every desire and purpose, and who through that Word graciously reaches out to save sinners like us. So dear friends, just as Abram did that day, so also today and every day believe the Word of the LORD – even when you’re afraid and even when life doesn’t make sense, because the Lord will credit it to you too as righteousness.

Our story picks up in Genesis 15 just after Abram returned home as a conquering hero. There was a war going on in the area – 4 kings vs. 5 – and Abram’s nephew Lot and his family were taken captive by the winning side. When Abram caught word of that, he set out with all the trained men in his household; he ransacked those kings and their men by night; he recovered Lot, his family, and all their possessions; and he brought them back home again. What a triumph it must have been.

But in those days, kings and their kingdoms were constantly at each other’s necks. Very often it was kill or be killed, and victory one day might turn to defeat the next if you weren’t careful and you didn’t watch your back. But for Abram, his fears went even deeper than just the possibility of retribution. See, the Lord had promised him a decade earlier, “*Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you... and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you*” (Genesis 12:1-3). It was a wonderful promise – but how could God keep it if those kings came for him with all their forces? And even if they didn’t, he was 85 years old and childless. How was he supposed to become a great nation if he couldn’t even have one child on his own? It wouldn’t matter if those kings took revenge on him and his family or not, because it’s not like he had anybody to carry on his name anyway.

But then the Word of the Lord came: “*Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.*” When the LORD says there’s no reason to fear, what could possibly prove him wrong? Who could possibly beg to differ? Maybe from our human perspective it might seem like there are reasons to fear, but not when we have the almighty God as our shield and reward. He can’t ever be caught off guard, he can’t ever be bribed to look the other way, and he can’t ever be overpowered. All throughout his life, Abram had been a traveling nomad who never truly had a home and was constantly in danger from bandits and armies and wild animals and the elements and who knows what else. But no – the LORD God was his shield to protect him against anything that would harm him, and to never leave him or forsake him wherever he went. The LORD God was his very great reward that nobody and nothing could take away from him – a living, loving relationship with the true God and the hopeful expectation to live with him in heaven forever. And the LORD God had promised that Abram would become a great nation, that his descendants would inherit that land, and that one day the Savior would come from his bloodline. So how could God’s promises fail? They couldn’t, and that meant until those promises were fulfilled, Abram had nothing to be afraid of.

And my friends, know that those same godly guarantees are yours nowadays, too. God is also *your* shield and *your* very great reward. God still wants us to call upon him in the day of trouble, because he *will* deliver us (Psalm 50:15) – and just the fact that we’re all here together today says that he’s done it just like he said he would – and if it’s his will that our time in this world be ended, he promises he has a mansion prepared just for us so we can be with him forever (John 14:2-3). With our gracious God, our lives are a win-win no matter what happens – and that’s something not even threats of war, not even uncertainty about our government, not even financial and family stresses can change. So believe the Word of the LORD, dear friends, because he is your shield, he is your very great reward, and he is the one who goes with you wherever you and your loved ones go.

And as tough as it may be to swallow sometimes, that’s true even when life just doesn’t make sense. And that’s really what Abram was struggling with. God promised that through Abram, the Messiah would come. But he was 85 years old at this point, and his wife was 75. Even back in those days when lifespans were longer, that didn’t offer a whole lot of hope for being able to have children if it didn’t happen yet up to that point. And as the days and years ticked by, that door just seemed to close tighter and tighter. Abram must have thought, “How is this supposed to work? Is one of my servants going to be my heir? God, what are you doing up there?”

Abram wondered and wondered and wracked his brain trying to figure this whole thing out, to no avail. But all that time, what God was doing was *training* him. God had every intention of making good on this promise to provide Abram with a full-blooded heir, but he was using this whole situation as a teaching point. And in fact, that’s what he continued to do for 15 more years yet! All that time, as Abram waited and waited and waited, the LORD was teaching him to be patient, to be content, and to trust. He was teaching him that when the LORD speaks, he is

*always* faithful because that's who he is – the L-O-R-D, the God who is absolutely and unfailingly faithful to his promises! You might not always see it, you might not always expect it, you might not always understand it – but just because the way he might do things is different from the way we might do things doesn't mean he's wrong. In fact, it means his way of doing things is so much better than we can comprehend and his purposes are so much higher than we could ever possibly imagine.

So after the LORD let Abram pour out his heart, the LORD filled it back up again with his grace and goodness. After Abram said everything he needed to say, then the Word of the LORD came to him once more: “*A son coming from your own body will be your heir... Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them... So shall your offspring be.*” No, God's promise to him wasn't about some servant in his household. Truly, his heir would be his own flesh and blood, one who would make descendants for him as countless as the stars in the sky – physical descendants that shared his bloodline, yes; but more importantly, *spiritual* descendants that shared his faith, who would be beautiful and bright and would shine like stars in the darkness of this sinful world. And his descendants would be able to do that by faith in *The* Descendant, Jesus Christ.

See, Jesus is the one that makes sense of a world that so often doesn't. He came into a world that is so often wrong in order to make it right again. He came to a people whose sin deserved death and instead delivered forgiveness and life. He came to a creation that was broken and destined for destruction, and pointed us toward eternity, toward a new heaven and a new earth where none of his people will fear or hurt or doubt ever again. He's the one that brings real peace and comfort, even when a virus brings the rest of the world to its knees. Or when you lose the job and the insurance you think you need to get by. Or when cancer tears apart your family's plans and dreams. Or when there are millions of babies being aborted every year, while some couples would do anything just to be able to have children of their own. Or any of those other things that just make you shake your head and wonder, how could this happen? Well, God's answer to you is the same as his answer to Abram: trust me. You might not understand now, but someday you will see that everything that happens in this world happens so that one way or another, my people come closer to me and finally make it home to heaven.

I know that sometimes life in this world can seem to make no sense at all – probably about as much sense as it made for those people watching Jesus die on the cross. Their Lord was murdered, their hope was lost, their faith seemed futile – until he rose again. And in that morning's light everything that was darkness before suddenly made sense. God was faithful to his promises, he did what he had to do to save us, and his love was seeing us through to heaven. No, Abram didn't understand. But he believed, and God delivered when 15 years later his son Isaac was born and some 2,000 years later, his greater son Jesus Christ was born. The disciples didn't understand, either, but then Jesus rose and put all their fears to rest. And so also you too,

believe the Word of the LORD – because his Word hasn't yet failed, he *always* makes good on his promises, and his words bring righteousness and life.

And friends, that's why what we're talking about here today and what we're doing here in this special October worship month isn't just some academic exercise. This isn't just some “Lutherans are good, Catholics are bad” echo chamber or bashing session. No, what we believe and teach about our God and his Word has huge implications for our faith and life – it did for Abram and Paul and Luther, and it still does for us today, too. The church in Luther's day was teaching people that God was just an angry judge who needed someone or something to take the edge off before he could stand to have anything to do with you. So you had to be good enough, or you had to pray to the saints for help, or you had to spend money on indulgences to buy your way into God's good graces, or else you had to spend years and years and years burning your sins away in Purgatory before God would maybe finally let you into heaven. That was a recipe for guilt and doubt and despair; that's the kind of teaching that destroys faith rather than builds it, because it took Jesus almost entirely out of the picture.

But then like the stars lighting up the night sky, God made sure that the true teaching of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone came shining through to us once again. And that's because Luther didn't believe the word of popes or councils. He believed the Word of the LORD. And that Word said that we cannot trust in our own righteousness, because that can never be enough to fight off the devil and keep us out of hell. No, only the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith in Jesus Christ can save us for heaven forever. So friends, let *that* be our comfort and our confidence, let *that* be our sure and certain hope no matter what we may have to face in our lives, and on *that* truth let us confess “Here we still stand!” until he returns or calls us home.

Yes, that last verse of our lesson for today really says it all, doesn't it? “*Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.*” The all-important principle we want to take away from today is that when it comes to the credit for our eternal salvation, God gives it so God gets it. *God gives the credit to us by grace through faith in Christ, so God gets the credit from us – all thanks and glory be to God alone!* We could never be right with God on our own, so Jesus came to *make* us righteous in God's sight by his perfect life, death, and resurrection for us. And now through faith in Jesus as our Savior from sin and death, just like Abram did, we can have total confidence that God will be with us, take care of us, and bless us in this life and the next. Even when we're afraid, even when life doesn't make sense, even when everything seems to be so wrong, faith in the true God is what makes it all right – for now and forever. After all, he's promised it – and when the Word of the LORD comes, what can we possibly do but listen and believe? So friends, even when it might seem impossible or unthinkable, even when your senses might say otherwise, even when everyone and everything else in this sin-broken world might tell you something different, do what Abram did: believe the Word of the LORD. Amen.