

Your Great Reward

In the name of Jesus our Righteousness, dear friends in Christ: At the opening of today's reading from Genesis, we find the patriarch Abram suffering from deep depression. He's got a case of disappointment with a capital "D". Why? It's because he feels cheated. From his perspective, it seems like the Lord God lied to him. And he's profoundly unhappy about it. But to understand why, we have to back up a bit. That makes sense because the text begins with the words "after these things" – which ought to make us ask, "What things? What happened that brought Abram here to where he is wallowing in despair?"

To tell his story we turn the clock back ten years. Abram is 75 years old. He's living in a city called Haran on the bank of the Euphrates River. It's located somewhere near where the border of Syria and Iraq is today. He resides there with Sarai, his wife, who is ten years younger than he. They are happily married. And they've been rather successful. They've got a fine home. They own productive farmland. They've got flocks and herds of livestock. They have many servants working for them. It's a good life. And they have every reason to believe that it will continue to be so as together they live out their golden years.

There is, however, a sadness they share. In all their years of marriage, Sarai has never been able to conceive. The couple is childless. And it's extremely painful for them. They've seen other families growing all around them. They've longed to have a child of their own to love, to care for, and to be their lasting legacy. But it was not to be. Not for them. And at this point in their lives, they recognize that whatever chance they had for fulfilling this greatest desire of their hearts is all but over.

But that very unexpectedly changed one day. The Lord God came to Abram and told him that he was the one. "I'm going to bless you, Abram; bless you more than you can imagine. I'm going to make of you a great nation, with descendants as numerous as the grains of sand on the seashore. I'm going to bring the promised Savior into the world through your offspring – and through him every family on earth will be blessed. So here's what I want you to do. Pack up your stuff and leave this land of your fathers. I'm going to show you a new land, a good land. It's overflowing with milk and honey. I'm going to give it to you and to your countless descendants as their lasting inheritance."

What a deal, huh? And the thing to see is that Abram didn't deserve any of this. In fact, we have no indication that Abram even knew and worshipped the one true God prior to this. Quite the contrary, we're told that his ancestors and family worshipped idols. The Lord's coming to and revealing himself to Abram and laying on him all these promises was only by pure grace.

And Abram was no dummy. When someone (especially the Lord) offers you a bargain like that, you take it. He did what he was told. Like Jed Clampett who loaded up the truck and moved to Beverly (Hills, that is), Abram gathered his belongings, took his wife in tow, and headed west as the Lord directed him – to where he did not know. Sometime later he arrived in the land of Canaan, which, to Abram's surprise, was already occupied by other tribes of peoples: Amorites, Hittites, Jebusites, and Philistines to name but a few. No matter; the Lord had Abram walk the length and breadth of the land so that he could see it all. And Abram found that it was exactly what the Lord had promised: a fertile land, with wide plains, forested hills, rivers and streams, and a wonderful Mediterranean climate that avoided the extremes of ever

being too hot or too cold. It was terrific. The Lord told Abram, “All this I’m giving to you and to your descendants.

Abram was delighted. “Thank you, Lord.” But since he didn’t actually own any of the land at the present, he ended up living there pretty much as a nomad. He alternately made his encampment in two places, spending summers in the cooler high country of (what would later become) Judah, and winters at Beersheba on the edge of the southern desert. Because of this you might think of Abram as the world’s first snowbird.

Interesting things happened to Abram in the 10 years that followed. During a famine, he went for a brief stay in Egypt. Things didn’t work out too well for him there. After a pulling particularly foolish and unfaithful stunt, he was declared “persona non grata” and expelled from Egypt by the Pharaoh himself. Sometime later, Abram did battle with a group of kings from the east. They had captured his nephew Lot and his family, along with many others who lived in the 5 cities of the plain south of the Dead Sea. With divine help, Abram and his small force of men visited the wrath of God upon these kings. He rescued the captives and returned them to their homes. And overall throughout this period Abram prospered greatly. If he was wealthy to begin with, and he was, then the Lord made him fabulously rich. He became a veritable prince among men, the head and effective owner of a community made up of at least a thousand people.

Abram could not deny that the Lord fulfilled his promise to bless him—*except in the one thing that mattered to him most*. Abram and Sarai still had no children. And now at 85 and 75 years of age respectively, they’d given up hope. The Lord had promised them a multitude of descendants and failed to come through with even one. “What’s all this that I’ve acquired worth” thought Abram “if I have no one to give it to?” His disappointment robbed him of all joy. And, as it turns out, he did have *someone* to give his possessions to: his head servant, a man named Eliezer of Damascus. Technically, in the language of the day, Eliezer was member of Abram’s household – a slave rather than a son; but he would have to do. Abram came to the conclusion that in order to fulfill the Lord’s word, he’d have to adopt Eliezer and make him the legal heir of both the estate and more importantly of the continuing promise to make of Abram a great nation and ultimately to bring the Savior into the world through him.

It would work. It was a way to do it. But it’s not what Abram had been led to believe. “I thought I’d be a father. I thought Sarai would be a mother. I thought we’d finally get to hold a child of our own in our arms. *This* is not what I banked on. I was deceived. And the Lord let me be deceived. He knew what I thought he meant. He let me get my hopes up only to let them come crashing down – as has happened all my life.” What’s he feeling? Anger. Resentment. Fear. Yes, fear. Why? “If the Lord deceived me about this, what else has he told me that might not be true? If I can’t rely on God, then nothing is certain.” That’s a scary thought indeed.

And it’s apparently the thought Abram is dwelling on at the beginning of today’s text when the Lord appears to him in a vision and tells him “Do not fear, Abram, I am your shield”. The word actually has a broader meaning than that. It can mean a place of refuge or defense. The Lord is telling Abram that he is his protector and Savior, that no harm can befall him, so he has nothing to be afraid of. The Lord also tells him that he is Abram’s very great reward. The translators of the text rendered it a bit differently saying “your reward shall be very great”; but they had to add the words “shall be” which aren’t in the Hebrew. The point is that the Lord himself is Abram’s reward. When you have him who is the giver of life and the source of all things, what else do you need?

But Abram is fixated on what he hasn't got. "Oh yeah? What are you going to give me, Lord, seeing as how you've deprived me of a son, and the heir of my estate is a crummy servant?"

Well, who told you that, Abram? That was your conclusion. It's not what the Lord said. "This man will not be your heir" the Lord told him. "A son coming from your own body will be your heir." The Lord is telling him to forget about what he sees and understands about the way things work. Don't think in worldly terms. Don't think about your limitations. You think a little thing like your advanced age can stop the Lord from fulfilling his word? If so, you don't know who you're dealing with.

The Lord led Abram outside and said, "Look up at the stars count them if you can. So shall your offspring be." Innumerable. Beyond counting. And amazingly Abram believed what the Lord told him. How? St. Paul tells us that faith comes by hearing the Word of God. That is to say, the Lord gives the faith to believe his Word as his Word is spoken. In the same way that Abram and Sarai could not have children by natural means, so by natural means it's impossible to for anyone to believe the promises of God. So the Lord works faith supernaturally by the power of his Spirit in those who hear his Word and promises.

That's what he did for Abram. That's how Abram could believe in something that physically and logically didn't seem possible. And through the faith he worked in Abram, the Lord counted him righteous. He does the same thing for us. Abram trusted in the Savior who was yet to come through him. We trust in the Savior who has already come through Abram. But neither Abram nor we get to see him as such. Yet we believe. By the power of the Spirit working through God's Word, we believe that in the fullness of time God fulfilled his promise to send his Son as a descendant of Abram. We believe that he lived for us the perfect life of obedience and love, and then gave that life as the sacrifice for our sins on the cross. We believe that defying what seems to be physically and logically impossible, he rose from the dead and later ascended into heaven. We believe that despite what we see in this world, he rules over all things and works everything for our good. And we believe that in the end he will come again, raise the dead from their graves, and give to us as our inheritance the new heaven and new earth. We've seen none of it. Yet we believe all of it. And by our faith the Lord counts us righteous.

It's worth noting that Abram had to wait another 15 years for the Lord to give him the son he promised. It was 15 years of not seeing but believing – believing that the Lord would give him a son and through him descendants as countless as the stars. Abram didn't need to see. He understood that the Lord himself was his Savior and his very great reward. And he trusted that when the Lord determined the time was right, he would do all that he'd promised.

This is our hope and trust as well, for we are counted among the descendants of Abram. We are counted his children not according to nature, but according to our supernatural faith in Jesus Christ. As he was for Abram, because we are his heirs, Jesus is our shield, our Savior, and our very great reward. Therefore we do not fear. We do not lose hope. And when we are tempted to lose faith, we repent. For we know that through Jesus, however long it may take, when the Lord determines the time is right, he will do for us all that he's promised. He will deliver us from all the afflictions and disappointments of this world, and take us to the place he has perfect prepared for us. We are sure of it. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!