

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Third Sunday in Advent, December 13, 2009

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Hymns: 40, 56: 1-3, 91, 64, 586:4-5

Lessons: Epistle: Genesis 22: 1-18, Galatians 3: 6-16, John 8: 30-59.

Text: Hebrews 11: 8-19.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

The New Testament begins in Matthew 1:1: ***“A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham.”*** This gives us a clue about the importance of Abraham in the New Testament. In the Old Testament, God’s chosen people, called “Israel”, “the Jews”, “the Hebrews” were the descendants of Abraham and Sarah through their son Isaac.

Both David and Abraham were shepherds. Today we talk about Abraham. In our next sermon we will talk about David. How do we know Abraham was also a shepherd? Well, for example, we read in Genesis 24:35: ***“The LORD has blessed my master [Abraham] abundantly, and he has become wealthy. He has given him sheep and cattle, silver and gold, menservants and maidservants, and camels and donkeys.”***

But Abraham was more than just a shepherd who pointed forward to Christ. He is commended even in the New Testament as

ABRAHAM – A SHEPHERD WHO BELIEVED IN GOD

1. ***“Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” (Romans 4:3)***
2. **The promise of the Savior was given to Abraham, too.**
3. **Jesus Christ, the Savior of all mankind, was a descendant of Abraham.**

The eleventh chapter of the letter to the Hebrews talks about faith, and begins: ***“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”*** Hebrews 11:1. Our sermon text zeroes in on the faith of Abraham. Now we know that faith is a gift of God, just as Jesus Christ, the object of that faith, is also a gift of God. So in looking at Abraham, we are really looking at the works of God, not just praising the man Abraham.

Listen as we are introduced to the first promise to Abraham, called here “Abram: ***“The LORD had said to Abram, “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; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran.”*** Genesis 12:1-4.

Abraham followed God, pulling up stakes – literally – for he lived in tents, and went where God called him, taking all his possessions and his nephew Lot and all his possessions. Of course Abraham took his sinful flesh with him and fell into sin again and again, forgetting for a time God’s promises. We find in him a man of faith whom God blessed abundantly, who fell into sins, who repented, and received the forgiveness of sins. He became a very wealthy man, and was a man who had many servants to look after the sheep and other flocks and herds God had given him. Yet we must recognize him as a shepherd, for we read in Genesis 12:16: ***“Abram***

acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, menservants and maidservants, and camels.” The sheep are mentioned first.

God later changed his name to “Abraham”, meaning “father of many nations” and repeated his promises: *“No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.”* Genesis 17:5-7.

In our Old Testament lesson you heard how God repeated this promise to Abraham. *“And through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed.”* Genesis 22:18. Those words came from God after an especially severe test of Abraham’s faith, when he was asked to sacrifice – to kill! – his only son from his wife Sarah, the son through whom he would have many descendants.

Paul, especially in Galatians – our Epistle lesson today – and in Romans speaks repeatedly of faith and Abraham’s faith. For example, he wrote by inspiration in Romans 4:1-5: *“What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about--but not before God. What does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.”*

In Romans, Paul was especially condemning the idea that we are saved by works, by good deeds, by obeying the law as summarized in the Ten Commandments. Jews were especially proud of their ancestor Abraham, and took great pride in being children of Abraham. Paul also repeatedly points out that it is not the mere being physical descendants of Abraham, but faith, such as Abraham had, that saves one eternally. Our sermon text from the part of the letter to the Hebrew Christians devotes more verses to Abraham and faith than it does to any other individual in those chapters. *“By faith Abraham”* we heard repeatedly. By faith he obeyed God and left his homeland. *“By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country.”* By faith he and his wife had the promised son, Isaac, at an age when children would normally be impossible. In faith he was looking forward to a home in heaven. *“By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.”* In Isaac we see a symbol or picture of Christ. He was about to be sacrificed because that is what God wanted Abraham to do. Jesus Christ was sacrificed because that is what his very own father, God in heaven, wanted to do to save sinful mankind.

Both in Romans chapter 4, as you just heard, and in our epistle lesson we also have this idea: *“Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”*

Note carefully the last verses of our epistle lesson that because of the seed, that is, a descendant of Abraham, we may have eternal life: *“Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: “All nations will be blessed through you.” So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.” Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, “The righteous will live by faith.” The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, “The man who does these things will live by them.” Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.” He redeemed us in order that the blessing*

given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.” Paul concludes this idea with this assurance: “The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say “and to seeds,” meaning many people, but “and to your seed,” meaning one person, who is Christ.” Galatians 3:7-14, 16.

So we know from scripture that Jesus Christ is not only Abraham’s Savior, but he is also a descendant of his. We see Abraham’s name in the genealogies of Jesus Christ, both on his mother’s side and in the ancestry of Joseph, who was believed to be his father, for inheritances were usually passed down through the father. We cannot separate the faith of Abraham from the fact that the Savior of all mankind will be born of his descendants. It is through the offspring born of Mary, a virgin of the descendants of David and Abraham that all the peoples of the earth will be blessed. The blessing of Jesus Christ and the forgiveness of sins that he brings is far greater, much more valuable than any earthly treasure.

When Mary of Nazareth, this descendant of the house of David despite living in Nazareth, along with Joseph her espoused husband, learned that she would be the mother of the Savior of the Jews as well as the Savior of all humans, she said this: ***“He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers.”*** Luke 1:54-55.

Notice that she named Abraham, one of her ancestors. Just a few verses later when John whom we call “the Baptist” was born, ***“His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us – to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, my child, [he’s talking of his son John] will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.” And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel.”*** Luke 1:67-80.

John himself preached: ***“Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.”*** Luke 3:8. We are like those stones. We are not physically descended from Abraham, yet we are among the spiritual children of Abraham through faith in Christ Jesus.

In our gospel lesson you heard Jesus say: ***“Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.” “You are not yet fifty years old,” the Jews said to him, “and you have seen Abraham!” “I tell you the truth,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!” At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds.”*** John 8:56-59.

Jesus is the eternal son of God, but he is also, because of his human ancestry, a son of Abraham. The unbelieving Jews of his day just could not accept – in faith – that Jesus was truly the Son of God as he told them. But you, by the grace of God, have come to believe that Jesus, the very Son of God was punished for all your sins even though he lived a perfect life. Through faith in him, you too have eternal life under Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep.

May Jesus Christ truly be your shepherd each day you spend yet here on earth and through all eternity!
Amen.