

To God Alone Be The Glory

I hope you've had this experience. You take a fresh egg, wash it with soap and water, carefully punch a small hole in both ends, and blow the insides out. Sounds easier than it is. You blow and blow and blow and blow. Oh, and did I mention? You blow. It feels like your blood pressure triples. But when you're done, you have an empty eggshell that you can keep and paint beautiful designs on without having to worry that the egg will rot and smell.

That's a good thing, but it reminds me of a bad thing. Without faith in the one true God, we would be like shells with handsome designs and pretty paint, but empty. We can solidly know all the facts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, but without faith there would be nothing on the inside: we would be just a shell of knowledge.

Thanks to the Holy Spirit we are not like empty eggshells. We're more like Jell-O. God's Word bumps our dish and we jiggle into action. Our faith loves to act when it hears God's message. This morning we get to see how God's Word bumped into Abram, and his faith jiggled into action. We want to FOLLOW ABRAM'S EXAMPLE OF LIVING BY FAITH.

God gave Abram something solid to believe in. Wait a minute. Was it really so solid? What did he give Abram besides a few promises? How solid is a promise? You can't sink your teeth into one. You can't build a bridge out of a promise. God gave Abram only promises. But when God makes a promise, it is sure to take place.

God never lies, and he's almighty. He can keep every promise.

In our text God gave five promises. Here's the **first**: ²*"I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you."* Way to start big, God! This was a childless couple. Abram was already 75, and Sarai was already 65. That's a bit old to have a child, isn't it? Well, God didn't think so. These "would-be" parents would be waiting 25 more years before God gave them a son. But God promised a great nation. And later it came true. *God's **second** promise was: ²*"I will make your name great and you will be a blessing,"* or possibly "[your name] will be a blessing." As it turned out Abram enjoyed a good name (a good reputation) with his Canaanite neighbors. The Jews of Jesus' day considered it a great honor to claim Abraham as their ancestor. God kept his promise to make Abram's name great. *The **third** promise: ³*"I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse."* Abram was about to travel into hostile territory. But he didn't need to worry. God promised to protect him in this foreign land. And he did. *The **fourth** promise: *"All peoples on earth will be blessed through you."* The only way this promise could come true was if the Messiah, the world's only Savior from sin, would someday come from Abram's family line. In order for Abram to have a family line, he would need to have offspring. See, the Lord really wanted Abram to believe the promise about having a child. *But God's not done yet. He gives a **fifth** promise later in the text: ⁷*"To your offspring I will give this land,"* and 400 years later God helped the children of Israel take over the land where the Canaanites lived.

That's five promises God gave Abram in these eight verses. Abram got to see only two of them come true, and only partially so. ¹The Lord made Abram's name great during his lifetime, but Abram's name has become even greater since then. ²The Lord blessed those who blessed Abram and cursed those who cursed him, but most of God's blessings and curses came true for Abram's descendants after his time on earth was over.

Stomp on the floor twice with your feet. Nice and solid down there. "On Christ the solid rock I stand." That's what it's like to be a New Testament believer, to see how many of God's promises have turned into historical facts. God's promises are solid. We can believe them.

Yet we still get to live by faith. Think it through with me. Aren't we part of the "all peoples" who have been blessed through Abram? Yes! The Messiah came. We are blessed through Jesus in this life and the next! We have forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation. With your left hand, would you please pick up some salvation and show it to me? Can you lay some salvation on the ground and stand on it? Salvation is something we hold onto only by faith. How do we know God won't punish us for our sins? We're just like Abram when it comes to God's promises. We can't prove we have forgiveness, eternal life, and salvation through faith in Jesus. But we believe it anyway, because when God promises something, it's as certain to happen as if it already had. As far as God is concerned, our forgiveness is a fact. God's promises are solid.

Abram lived by faith. You can tell because Abram **acted** on God's promises. He didn't say, "I'm 75. That's too old to start over, God. My bones ache and my eyes are weak and I can't hear when people talk." Nope, he acted on God's promises. Try to imagine yourself as one of Abram's neighbors in Haran. You've heard through the rumor mill that Abram is leaving his clan to go on a trip. "Say, did you hear about that crazy Abram? Says he's leaving Haran. That's just plumb loony to leave the protection of your clan and go off on your own. I asked him where he was going, and he said he didn't know. Says the Lord told him to pack up and leave, and he'd find out 'where to' later. With his luck, Abram will probably wind up lost in the desert... or worse yet, in Canaan! You know how they treat outsiders. He might as well leave all his possessions with us. Better than lettin' the Canaanites get 'em. Let's go say our 'good-byes' to Sarai and Lot. Probably won't see them again either." Abram shut his ears to all such comments. He lived by faith.

This morning let's consider how we as a congregation can FOLLOW ABRAM'S EXAMPLE OF LIVING BY FAITH. How might we do this? Imagine that your fellow members are so grateful to God for his mercy in Christ that you see them all taking steps to strengthen their connection to each other. "Wait. This sounds good. I want to be a part of it too. What do I do?" Let's all make God's Word a higher priority than everything else we love in this life. Why? Because God connects us to him through his message.

Want to hear two good reasons to gather faithfully for in-person worship? Because ¹God connects us to others through his message, and ²your presence in worship encourages others. If you need to watch the worship videos from home for a medical reason, or because you have to work on Sunday morning, or because you have no ride to church, or because you live a long way from St. John's, what a blessing to have the worship videos available on channel 18 or 13 twice each week and on YouTube 24/7/365! Please keep watching faithfully and frequently. But if you're watching the worship videos from home for convenience (or because YouTube lets you skip parts of the service and limit how much time you give to God), there's a mismatch between what the Bible teaches and what you're doing. Christ's kingdom isn't about making life easier for you. It's about serving God and others, because God served us first. Your presence in worship is a great encouragement to all the other worshipers. Whenever you watch from home for your own advantage, the rest of us are being deprived of you. This is a big deal: you're important to your church family, because you are important to God.

But there's another good reason to make God's message our highest priority. Our TV and computer screens at times preach ideas that don't match up with what God reveals in the Bible as true. It's hard to maintain a strong faith from only one hour of worship each week. So why not read your Bible 5 to 20 minutes per day, or listen to it? Add some prayers to Bible time and this makes our homes or our cars places of spiritual growth, for ourself or for our whole household.

Bible study at home is great. Our church library has lots of helpful material. But Bible study where you get to interact with fellow believers is even better. Not only does this deepen our connection to Jesus, it also intertwines our hearts. As we master the Holy Scriptures together, we gain appreciation for our purpose as a congregation: to share God's message of sin and grace inside and outside these walls. This is how a church becomes like a team of horses, all yoked together, pulling our gospel ministry forward to the glory of God and for the benefit of our neighbors. God helps us pull our ministry forward by giving us all kinds of different skills that can be harnessed together. Soon $1+1+1=5$. That's the kind of church St. John's can become, but only to the extent that each member grabs hold of this idea and adopts these God-pleasing behaviors.

Look at the blessings God has already poured out on us as a church. We get to gather for worship and Bible study every Sunday morning. We have other Bible study groups who meet weekly or monthly, including Ladies Aid, which also then serves our gospel ministry in many ways. We have young teenagers who meet for Bible study each week so that someday they will be ready to stand up and publicly profess their faith in Jesus and promise to remain faithful to him for the rest of their earthly lives. We have quite a number of adults who would like to start a similar course of Bible study, if the pastor could free up some time. We offer a monthly worship service in town for people with developmental disabilities. We regularly send out communications to members and

prospects by email and US mail. A group of members goes and visits people who have moved into this area, taking a homemade gift, which yet another of our groups makes. This other group also makes quilts as gifts for people who need a reminder that God loves them, and we do too. Yet another group sends a card to people in the community who are celebrating anniversaries or who have lost a loved one. Someone else visits members who used to attend worship regularly. Five different groups are feeding us Lenten suppers on Wednesdays. We have a website that anyone with internet anywhere in the world can look at and find encouragement to connect with Christ through his Word. There's a very quiet group of people who faithfully counts our offerings and pays our congregation's bills. Our Altar Guild always has the elements for Holy Communion set up and cleaned up for us, and they hang appropriate banners in our worship area. By our school and pre-school we get to lay the gospel of Jesus on the hearts of about 85 children and sometimes their parents and grandparents too. Many of you pray regularly for each other and for our staff and for the missionaries we support in our country and around the world. Some of us are involved in Lutheran Women's Missionary Society. The Lord has us engaged in a lot of ministry, living by faith as Abram did, and there's more going on I didn't speak about. May God have all the glory!

And yet, dear friends, I see a number of ways we could improve our ministry. How great would it be if every member of St. John's said things like this? "I'm going to attend worship every Sunday, even if it

means cutting back on personal interests or rearranging my work schedule." Or "I'm going to contact members who aren't able to attend on Sunday mornings to see if I can help take an obstacle out of the way." How great would it be if everyone said things like this? "You know, Bible study and Sunday School is important. I'm going to attend on Sunday mornings." Or "I'm going to talk to others about starting a Bible study in my home." Or "I'm going to help our high schoolers connect to Jesus and each other through God's Word." Or "I think our married couples could benefit from a marriage retreat. I'm going to talk to all the couples and get a marriage retreat planned." Or "I'm single, so I'm going to organize our singles for spiritual growth and activities." Or "I like fixing things, so I'm going to inspect our property and work at making some improvements." Or "I like to catalogue things and put them in order so they are easier for others to use." Or "I like to decorate for special events." Or "I think outreach to our community is so important, I'm going to figure out how to do it well. Pastor says we could keep a hundred of our members busy in outreach."

See, if each of us asks ourselves, "With the abilities God gave me, how can I glorify God and help my congregation pull our ministry forward?", we are living by faith as part of our congregation, jiggling into action like a bowl of Jell-O that God's Word has bumped into. God has given us great promises. Let's believe him, like Abram did. God has given us great responsibilities. Let's act on them, like Abram did.