

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 14)
St. Luke 12:22-40; Genesis 15:1-6; Hebrews 11:1-16

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

A cursory reading of today's lessons reveal that they are about faith. There is a theme of taking God solely at His word, of full reliance and trust in God simply because He says a thing is so.

I'll begin with the Old Testament lesson. Abram, in the midst of his God-ordered nomadic journey, had a vision in which God speaks to him. God's first words to Abram were, "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." "Fear not," God said, so Abram feared not. God said it, and Abram took Him at His word.

Fearless, Abram was bold even to ask God what He will give him, since he had no heir, spare a servant in his house—not even a relative! Abram was very old by this time, as was his wife, Sarai; she was well past the child-bearing age. There was nothing more Abram could do than pick someone out of a lineup to give all that he had accumulated, to put it crassly, and Eliezer was the lucky schmuck.

Eliezer would not be Abram's heir, God declared, but there would be one who came from his own body that would be his heir. God said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them. So shall your offspring be." "You will have as many descendants as there are stars; count the stars, if you can, Abram, count the stars."

In reading the last verse, you might get the sense that Abram simply said, "Okay." "And [Abram] believed the LORD, and He counted it to him as righteousness." It's not that Abram did anything. He had no choice than not to trust that what God said is what would happen, and Abram didn't even do that. God said, "You will have an heir and as many descendants as there are stars," and in saying that gave Abram the faith to believe it. Abram did not reject this promise from God, but believed it by God-given trust. That's faith—trusting in God's promise—and it is credited to the faithful one, here Abram, as righteousness. Righteousness is, at its core, fear, love, and *trust* in God above all things.

After this, God "cut a covenant" with Abram, sealing the deal of His promise to Abram that he will have an heir and many, countless descendants. Abram sacrificed a few animals, cutting them in half (spare the birds), and YHWH walked in the midst of them, receiving the sacrifice and placing a seal on His promise to Abram.

Moving into today's Epistle, you learn from the author of the letter what the definition of faith is: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." By faith, the author declared, you know that the worlds, even this one, were formed by the Word of God, that they were created from nothing—nothing more than God saying, "Let there be..." and there was! By faith, the author continued, Abel, Enoch, Noah, and Abraham did some great things, all on account of the trust they had been given by God to believe that when God says something, it will happen.

"[F]aith is the assurance of things hoped for." God told Abram he would have an heir and countless descendants. Abram said, "Okay"; by faith—the assurance and concreteness of the hoped-for heir and descendants—Abram was able to take God at His word. He could not see any of this happening, especially at the moment when God said it would happen; there was no natural way Abram would have an heir from his own body, much less countless descendants. However, God's promise was all the evidence Abram had and needed for this thing not seen much less readily apparent to him. So it was also with the promises God made to Abel, Enoch, and Noah.

"[F]aith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Faith is being certain of what one does not nor cannot see; it is believing what is not seen. Therefore, that old axiom, "Seeing is believing," is quite false. Seeing is seeing—knowing based on visible evidence; if you see it, you don't have to believe it! In that sense, faith and trust are, in a word, incredible.

Faith and trust are incredible; that is to say that there is nothing visible to give credence to that which one trusts is or will happen. One trusts that airplanes will stay aloft because the ones that are flying are expected to be structurally sound. One trusts that the bottle labeled aspirin actually contains aspirin because that's what the label says. One takes the engineers, mechanics, and pharmaceutical companies at their word in these matters without personally inspecting the products; there is no visual evidence to confirm that what is meant to happen or meant to be in the bottle is actually going to happen or actually going to be in the bottle. That's how trust and faith operate.

So it was, that after telling the parable of the poor rich man, Jesus turned to His disciples and told them

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? If then you are not able to do as small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass, which is alive in the field today, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith!

In short, don't worry about stockpiling goods and riches here (like the poor rich man from last week, which is the text just before today's). God takes care of the birds of the air and even the lilies of the field; and to you, who is a more precious creation than they, He promises to take care of you as well, to feed and clothe you and give you all that you need, not only for this life, but for life in the world to come. This is His promise to you...believe it!"

That's all that you have to go on. "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Fear not. Do not worry about this life. "It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Bank on it!

Easier said than done, isn't it? However, that's how faith and trust work. Despite everything else going on around you, faith and trust still cling to the given word and promises. Despite the many reports of disasters involving airplanes, especially those due to mechanical failure, people still trust that airplanes will stay aloft because the engineers and mechanics say that they are supposed to. Despite the occasional mislabeled or mis-filled aspirin bottle or the occasional pain reliever laced with a toxin, people still take the aspirin in the bottle because the pharmaceutical company says the contents are supposed to be safely packaged aspirin.

It is supposed to work that way with faith and trust in God's promises, too. Despite the death and decay all around, and even within, you should believe that God has promised the healing of your bodies because God has said so. Despite the starving and naked and homeless, you are still called to heed God's promise which says that He will feed you with more than He feeds the ravens and clothe you in better raiment than He clothes the lilies. As life in this fallen world continues, not only do you not see evidence of these promises of God, but you see evidence to the contrary...and, dare I say, with many of the other promises, too. And in many cases, people look for that contrary evidence!

But, that's how God works His promises—in ways that, to your senses, seem contrary to what was promised. God has promised eternal life and healing of body and soul, but uses death as the gateway to it. God has proclaimed victory over sin, death, and the devil and points to an event which appears to all senses to be a miserable failure—the death of His Son on the cross while, to all appearances, it would seem the devil had won. But it is in that death where you find your victory; for you are told that there can be no forgiveness of sins without the shedding of blood—without a sacrifice (cf. Hebrews 9:22)—and that sacrifice was made by God in the person of His Son. Now that the Son has shed His blood for you, the devil can no longer use your sin to condemn you before God—His

accusations are all in vain! Furthermore, the victory over death was achieved in His resurrection—the resurrection from the dead that you were joined to and promised in the waters of Holy Baptism.

That is what you are called by the Word of God to believe, despite and in spite of the evidence in the world around you to the contrary. God has promised it and says believe it, and gives you the faith to believe it! Remember, God always keeps His promises.

However, therein lies another danger. One could come away from all that I have said so far thinking that God keeps His promise because of the trust of the people to whom God has made the promise. It's akin to one saying that they are saved because they believe, that God shows people grace and favor once they put their trust in Him. Saying this is turning faith and trust into the work of the believer, a work that merits God's grace and favor.

The next logical step, then, would be to say that one who suffers and does not experience God's promise must not believe or not believe hard enough. If I am saved because I believe in God and trust His promise, and if I am not seeing God's promised fulfilled in my life, then my faith and trust must not be strong enough or must not exist at all.

However, faith and trust do not save. That bears repeating: faith and trust do not save. Suffering and not seeing the fulfillment of God's promise in one's lifetime is not evidence for a lack of faith or the lack of a strong enough faith. God has promised salvation and eternal life, but He has not given a time-frame. God does promise everlasting rest and glory for those who remain faithful to him, but He does not promise that these things will happen during one's life on this earth; in fact, He promises quite the opposite (see Matthew 5:10-12).

No, faith and trust do not save; it is the object of that faith that saves. "Faith does not reconcile us of itself, but it grasps and obtains the reconciliation which Christ has wrought for us," Luther wrote. God saves in Christ by grace, and it is faith which receives this grace. That's how you should understand it when you hear those times when Jesus said, "Your faith has saved you." That's how St. Paul explained it to the Ephesians: "You are saved by grace through faith..." (Ephesians 2:8) That's Scripture interpreting Scripture.

So, God promised Abram that he would have an heir and countless descendants. It didn't take long before Abram's trust in God's promise wavered and he begot a son through Sarai's servant Hagar. However, God kept His promise and gave him an heir through Sarai. God promised that through Eve would come a seed that would crush the serpent's head. However, Adam and Eve were cast from paradise where they and their descendants continued to struggle with sin and doubting God's promise. Despite that doubt, God kept His promise and sent His Son, Eve's seed, who crushed the head of Satan as He was crucified, removing Satan's dominion over all who receive the Christ by God-given faith. God is merciful and gracious and keeps His promises no matter the strength or lack of trust.

Still, it must be said that it is faithlessness that condemns. St. Mark writes, "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; **but he who does not believe will be condemned.**" (Mark 16:16) While faith does not save, but the object of true faith does (and He is the one who does the Baptizing), faithlessness, also called unbelief, condemns. Unbelief is a determination that the entire life and work of Christ, especially his death and resurrection, is of no effect and no consequence; and this determination can be made with or without prior knowledge of God and His Christ. It is to say that the Christ's salvific work is not needed or wanted because one believes they can get along and are getting along fine without it—faithlessness, or unbelief, is rejection of God's grace. This is the "life" of the devil, the world, and of that sinful flesh that you faithful still struggle with as the Old Adam in you. Unbelief condemns, but it does not prevent God from keeping His promises, because God is perfectly faithful!

This doubt, or unbelief, does not condemn one who truly lives by faith, though. For it is by God-given faith that this unbelief is recognized for the sin that it is and confessed if by nothing more than saying, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief." (Mark 9:24) And to one such as this God is faithful and just to forgive his sins and cleanse him from all unrighteousness (cf. 1 John 1:9), just as He has promised to do.

While faithlessness, or unbelief, is rejection of God's grace, God-given faith is the open hand that receives God's grace; therefore, "He who believes and is baptized will be saved." (Mark 16:16a)

That is why you who live by faith, yet still in the flesh, look forward to another promise of God: the promise to return in glory and take you to be where He is now where there will be no more sin, weeping, or gnashing of teeth. Jesus mentioned this in today's Gospel when He said,

Stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning, and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them. If he comes in the second watch, or in the third, and finds them awake, blessed are those servants! But know this, that if the master of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have left his house to be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

I don't know how many times I have heard the phrase, "faith is forward-looking." Despite the things that happen in this fallen world, and even because of them, the fervent prayer of faith is, "Come quickly, Lord Jesus." It is a prayer that eagerly looks forward to the time when God fulfills His promise to return in the person of His Son. That's why Jesus instructs, "[B]e ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

But here's the thing about this forward-looking faith: it is looking forward to that time when the master returns from a wedding. It is clear from Scripture that when the Christ returns, He comes to judge the earth (cf. Psalm 96:13), and that in judgment, He will get His revenge over His enemies who persecuted and killed His people (cf. Revelation 6:10). But from the lips of Christ Himself, you get a different picture: "Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them." When the Christ returns, He is coming to feast with His expectant servants, to serve them at the wedding feast of victory of the Lamb which has no end.

Dear hearers, what a marvelous picture this is, for you celebrate today with an expression of that forward-looking faith. In a few minutes, your Lord and master will serve you His body and blood hidden in bread and wine and your God-given, forward-looking faith will receive strength and the forgiveness of your sins. You will participate with the Church of all times and places in a *foretaste* of that wedding feast of victory of the Lamb, as the Lamb comes to His expectant servants right here at this altar. You eat the Lord's Supper here and now as you eagerly wait for the time when the Christ returns as He has promised to judge the earth, take you to be where He is now, and serve you at the everlasting feast in His Kingdom which has no end.

"[F]aith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." You have not seen that day, but you certainly hope for it, for God has promised that He will do it. Therefore, the words spoken to Abram in today's Old Testament lesson are spoken into your ears, dear faithful: "Fear not...I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." You look forward to that great and dreadful day expectantly and joyfully and fearlessly, in full God-given trust in the promises of God, looking to Christ and Christ alone as your salvation—by grace you have been saved...you ARE saved! He is your shield and exceedingly great reward!

And so you trust. God has said it; God will make it so. You can trust—that is God's free gift to you in Jesus Christ's blood shed on the cross for you and risen again from the grave for you. God has promised it; God has made it so—for it is there that God has fulfilled this promise to you: you are forgiven for all of your sins!

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.