

Followers: Don't Fret the Future (Pentecost 9- 8/11/19)

I want you to imagine yourself in two hypothetical scenarios. **Scenario A:** You're sick. The doctors have performed countless tests and consulted with numerous experts, but everyone's stumped about what's wrong. They've tried everything they can think of, but instead of getting better, you just seem to be getting worse. **Scenario B:** You're sick. The pain has been excruciating, but the doctors quickly diagnosed the problem, and have scheduled a very routine procedure that will return everything to normal soon.

In which of those two scenarios would it be easier for you to trust that everything will end up OK? Scenario B, right? It's easier to trust that things will get brighter and more certain when there's visible evidence that points to the positive.

But what about when there isn't much evidence? What if the circumstances of your health, or your job, or school, or your family look downright bleak? What if you have more questions than answers? What if you have more uncertainty than certainty? Can you still trust? Can you still see through **Eyes of Faith When the Vision Is Bleak?**

That was the question Abram-- whose name God later changed to the better known Abraham-- was wrestling with in our sermon text. If you don't remember Abram's backstory, when he was 75 years old, God told him leave his homeland and extended family, and move to a new land God would show him. And so Abram did! With his wife and his nephew, Abram packed up their belongings and set out into the unknown. How could Abram trust God in such an uncertain future?

He could trust, because God made Abram these promises when he called him to move: ***"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."***

And over the next 2 decades, God certainly kept those promises. He kept Abram safe, and blessed him with a strong faith, great wealth, and success in everything he did.

But although God made and kept so many promises to Abram, there was still one promise left unfulfilled. God promised Abram that a great nation would spring from his offspring. The problem was, Abram didn't have any offspring. Even worse, Abram was nearly 100 years old. Even worse, his wife Sarai was also old. Even worse, she was also barren. Not exactly circumstances that bode well for becoming a great nation!

Because things looked so bleak, when God encouraged Abram, ***"Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward,"*** the doubt growing in Abram's mind found his lips. ***"O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus? "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."***

Assuming it was impossible for God to keep that promise through a biological son, Abram made backup plans. In Abram's day, a man could adopt one of his servants to be his legal heir. But Abram knew that if his servant Eliezer was his heir, it wouldn't be his family line that would produce the Savior God had promised. And that must have broken his heart.

Throughout his life, Abram had shown amazing trust in God's promises. And yet, the lack of visible proof that God would turn an old man with an old, barren wife into a great nation made "believing without seeing" increasingly harder.

Maybe you understand Abram's pain, because something in your life seems bleak or uncertain too. Maybe like Abram and Sarai, you've struggled with infertility. Maybe you're in a financial hole you're unsure you'll ever climb out of. Maybe your relationships never work out. Maybe you can't break an addiction. Maybe depression or anxiety hang over you like a storm cloud. Maybe your grades won't get you into your dream school. Maybe the doctor's prognoses are grim. Whatever it is for you, when life looks bleak, it's easy to doubt, and hard to trust.

So, how do we respond? Ultimately, there are three ways. 1.) You can trust in God. 2.) You can trust in yourself. 3.) You can quit trusting, and give up hope.

Many believe trusting in God is a pointless, feel-good story that weak, foolish people cling to, to convince themselves that everything will be OK. The world, and our own sinful hearts tell us that the second option is best. If your life looks bleak, then trust in yourself, take the bull by the horns, and take action to change the bad things in your life for the better. We like that option, because it makes us feel like we have complete power and control in our lives. If I don't like it, I can simply change it.

But if we take action, and can't change the bad things in our lives? Then you're left with option 3: hopelessly resign yourself to a life that will always be bleak and miserable. Abram's life is a great example of what option is best.

A couple of chapters after today's text, Abram gets tired of trusting, and takes matters into his own hands. At the urging of his wife, Abram takes Hagar, one of her maidservants, as a second wife, and had a son with her. You can guess how well that turned out for the family! While trusting in himself to take care of the problem might have been desirable, trusting in himself instead of God made everything blow up in Abram's face.

And the same can happen to us. Taking matters into our own hands, instead of trusting in God can ultimately lead us further away from what God knows is best for our souls. Can you remember a time when you thought something was the best thing for you, only in hindsight to realize that you had no idea what was best? Who are we to think that we know better than the all-knowing God what we need? It would be like insisting that you're the one who tries to diffuse a bomb, because you're in the building with it, rather than letting the trained bomb squad do it. Just because you're in the midst of the chaos, doesn't mean you know best how to deal with it.

And what a sad state it would be to just resign yourself to a life of misery and hopeless, when the reason for hope and to trust is right in front of your nose. It would be like a hopeless beggar starving when there's a homeless shelter with food right around the corner.

When Abram trusted in God, everything always turned out for his good. Likewise, the best way for us to respond when life looks bleak, is to see our lives through eyes of faith! That's not easy though, because it requires us to hand over the power and control of our lives to another. But how much easier we can do that when God knows what's best, and takes action for our best interests!

God responded to Abram's doubts, "***[Eliezer] will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir.***" Do you see what God does? He doesn't immediately zap a son into Sarai's womb. Rather, he doubles down on the promise he'd already made. A few years later, Abram would hold a son in his arms. But for now, God simply reminds Abram of his promises, and tells him, "Believe it! Not because of proof, but because I've promised."

That said, God still understands the benefit of visuals. Under a clear night sky, God tells Abram, "***Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them. So shall your offspring be.***" Experts

estimate that around 8,000 stars are visible on a clear, Middle Eastern night. Think what a powerful visual reminder that would have been for Abram! Every time doubts crept into his mind, he only had to poke his head out of his tent, and be reminded of God's promise.

God didn't add any visible evidence to convince Abram he would have a son. Stars aren't proof that an old barren woman would have a baby. Rather, through his words and his visual, God points Abram back to his promises.

But how much difference would promises make? Wouldn't Abram still be seeing the same bleak landscape for his future? Yet, ***"Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness."*** Faith doesn't demand proof or evidence. Faith simply trusts God's promises. And Abram trusted God's promises, because the Holy Spirit worked through God's Word to strengthen Abram's faith. Even when the vision was bleak, Abram could still see life through eyes of faith. And so can we! As the writer to the Hebrews says, ***"Faith is being...certain of what we do not see."*** Certainty not from evidence, but certainty because God keeps his promises.

That's the reason why the best response to uncertainty in life is to trust in God. As unlikely as it seemed, God kept his promise, and gave 100-year old Abram and barren Sarah a biological son, Isaac.

Even more importantly, God kept the most important promise he made— ***"And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."*** Abraham was a pretty important guy, but on his own, he wasn't a blessing to everyone on earth. Rather, it was through the Savior that came from Abram's family line, continued through Isaac, that God kept that promise.

That all-important promise, God didn't fail to keep. He sent his own Son to be born, not of an old barren woman, but of a virgin. That's why God could count Abram's faith to him as righteousness. Abram himself wasn't morally perfect. Far from it! Rather, Abram received Jesus' perfection, the Savior Abram believed God would send through his family line. And that wasn't just the case for Abram.

In Romans 4, Paul writes, ***"The words "It was credited to him" were written not for [Abram] alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead."***

You see, when you have Spirit-produced faith that Jesus is your Savior, Jesus' perfect life and innocent death are credited to your account! No matter how often you've doubted. No matter how smudged, filthy, and bleak God's vision of your life should be, on account of Jesus, God sees you as perfectly clean.

No matter how bleak and uncertain your life might seem, is it anything that God, who conquered sin, death, and hell can't handle? Is it anything that God, who gave his one and only Son, can't give? Is it anything that the God who never fails to keep his promises won't keep?

Then stop trusting in yourselves. Put away your hopelessness. Tonight, go outside and look up at the stars and take heart. Although you won't see as many in the Jacksonville night sky as in the Middle Eastern desert, be reminded what those stars meant to Abram—that God keeps his promises. The same is true for you, because the only evidence you need in order to trust, is Jesus—the one who was the perfect fulfillment of God's promise to Abram--the one through whom all people are blessed, including you and me!