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Text: Hebrews 11:1 – 16
Title: That's Easy for You to Say...

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. The young man wasn't all that much to look at, and his hygiene typically left a lot to be desired even in that day and age. That wasn't surprising though because he spent most of his time out in the fields with all of those stinking sheep. That's why it was a surprise when he was given such an honor. There just wasn't anything about him to suggest that he was anything special.

But then again, it wasn't his outward appearance or his actions that he was being honored for. Abel was being honored because of the great faith that he was displaying before God. He could have offered a different sacrifice. He could have taken the leanest and toughest part of the sheep that he had slaughtered, or he could have used one that was crippled or a runt. He might have chosen an older animal or not offered any sacrifice at all. But his faith told him that something special was needed to worship the One who had created his parents and everything around him. God deserved an offering of the very best that he had to give, and so he took the firstborn from his flocks and offered up only the best portion of it. After all, if God had already provided him such a choice animal, He could certainly do it again.

His brother, on the other hand, seemed to be making an offering because he had too. It was almost as though he resented doing it, and he was just trying to get by with doing the bare minimum in order to gain God's favor, even though he acted like what he was giving up was a big deal. That's probably why he was so mad when Abel's offering was accepted and his was rejected. Cain had convinced himself that his actions deserved God's favor.

So Cain persuaded Abel to take a walk with him out in the fields saying that he wanted to look at the flocks to see exactly what type of sacrifice his brother had offered. Abel suspected

nothing, and he was glad to try and help his brother. Finally, Abel bent down to pick up one of the choice lambs that he had used, and while his back was turned and his neck was exposed, Cain struck and Abel was dead.

Abel is now remembered as one of many who are held up by the writer of today's epistle as an example of faith. The eleventh chapter of Hebrews has been called "The Hall of Fame of Faith" because it lists many people from the Old Testament whose faith "gained approval." Although we don't know for sure who wrote the book of Hebrews, we know from this chapter alone that the writer was Divinely Inspired with an incredible understanding of what faith is. Faith "...is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old gained approval." Hebrews leaves no room for doubt that it was the faith of Abel which found favor in God's eyes, not what he did. It was Abel's faith that resulted in his actions, and without that faith his sacrifice would have been rejected as well.

When it comes to your relationship with God, faith is everything. It's not about what you say or what you do or even what you pray or how you feel, but it is the faith alone that He has given you that results in these things. Without faith, a person is totally and completely incapable of pleasing God no matter how good the world may think that person is. Without faith in the One true God as the motivation for your action, the kindest act in the eyes of the world isn't acknowledged by God because it is corrupted and infected by sin.

But faith cleanses us before God, and makes us new. With the faith that He gives us through His Word and in Holy Baptism, we are made righteous in His sight. The story of Abram in today's Old Testament reading teaches us what God accomplishes when He gives us the gift of faith, He does nothing less than make us full heirs of His promises.

Abram, who we all know was to be renamed Abraham later, was 75 years old and his wife, Sarai, was 65 years old when the Lord, Yahweh, first called them to go to the land of

Canaan. During their journeys, the Lord promised to make his descendants as numerous as the stars. All of you who are over the age of 65, honestly consider how you would react if you were promised children born to you right here and right now. Now consider how you would react if that promise, which had still not been fulfilled, was repeated to you 24 years from today? Would you honestly believe it today? Would you honestly believe it 24 years from today?

Honestly, each one of us would have to answer, “No!” People are surprised today when someone in their 40’s is expecting a child. Physically, no woman in her 60’s can ever expect to have a child of her own, and certainly a woman who is 39 wouldn’t be blamed for doubting her ability to give birth much less become pregnant. But faith tells us that with God all things are possible. Faith assures us that the promises of God that we hope for will indeed happen, and today’s Old Testament reading concludes with this wonderful statement of that fact in verse 6. “Then he believed in the Lord, and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.” Or as Paul states it in Romans 4:3, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.”

Through the gift of faith God accomplished something even more incredible than giving a son to a 100 year-old man and his 90 year old wife. He made that man righteous in His sight. In spite of all of the sin that infected Abraham, God declared him to be a righteous man because he had *faith* in the Lord and His promises, and He does the same thing for you. Paul continues in Romans 4:24b, “It will be counted to us who believe in Him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord...” Your faith in Jesus is also counted to you as righteousness.

The very same faith in the Lord that made Abraham righteous in His eyes, is the same saving faith that we have in our Triune God, faith that is given and strengthened by His Word and Sacraments. It is the faith that believes in Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross being enough to pay for all of our sins completely and totally, sins that should condemn us to death and hell. It is also the same faith that believes that He rose from the dead to give us everlasting life. It is the faith

that assures us of things hoped for, and gives us the conviction of things that we have not seen, like the resurrection of the dead. None of us has ever seen that happen, but we have faith in the promise of God that the bodily resurrection of Jesus *did* happen and it *will* happen with us.

We know that our faith is nowhere near as strong as Abraham's or even Abel's. It certainly isn't as strong as Enoch's, whose faith allowed him to escape physical death when God "took him up." Abraham didn't even have faith that was strong enough to avoid physical death. You and I would probably seek counseling if we heard a voice in our head or saw a vision of someone telling us to go and build an ark big enough to hold a sample of the animals in creation because God was about to destroy the world in a massive flood. If your faith were truly put to the test in the same way as those mentioned in Hebrews 11, would it stand that test? Most of us should probably hang our heads and truthfully answer, "No," to this question. We don't belong with these members of "The Hall of Fame," but then again, we don't have to because we have seen God through His Son and in His Word and Sacraments.

All of those people who are written about in Hebrews 11 lived their lives of faith before most of the Lord's promises were fulfilled. As Hebrews 11:13 states, "All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth." Abraham and Sarah didn't even live to see Jacob's 12 sons move into Egypt. Enoch, Noah, and Abel likely didn't live long enough to see Abraham, but we live in a different age that knows the fulfillment of what was only promised to the Heroes of Faith. Our age knows Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

The Lord has seen fit to give us a life that knows that His promises have been fulfilled in Christ. Christians throughout these past 2000 years are now the true descendants of Abraham that were first promised to him in Genesis 15 this morning, and our number exceeds the number

of stars. Abraham was promised that his descendants would be a blessing to the entire world, and through the message of the Gospel that all of us Christians are called to share with the world around us; we are part of that same blessing.

Even though your faith and mine is pitifully weak when it's compared to the giants of faith from the Scriptures, Christ has promised that even the smallest amount of faith is enough to bless you with salvation through Him. You never have any need to worry about whether or not your faith will be enough to get you into heaven because any amount of faith in Christ will be enough. That is part of His promise for Christians throughout history. Faith makes you citizens of His kingdom, and faith will bring you to your true home when He comes again.

That is the final promise that faith assures us of, and the one that we most long for the fulfillment of in this world of sin and suffering, the promise of Christ's return to this world. When that day finally arrives, "He will come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead." Those who are alive through faith in Him will be given everlasting life in the new heaven and new earth, His kingdom, and those who are dead without faith will remain so in eternal condemnation. The Lord God has promised this to us all, and as Abel, Enoch, Noah, Sarah and Abraham knew and still show us today through their great example of faith proclaimed to us in God's Holy Word; the Lord *always* keeps His promises to His people. Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.