

Sermon for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 14C) August 10, 2025 jj
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Two times in the Scripture lessons just read God tells us that we are not to be afraid. Well, that's awfully easy for God to say, isn't it? It seems as if God is always saying things like that. He's always telling you to believe with all your heart – that you are to trust in Him for all your needs – and that you are to rely on His strength when you have no strength of your own. But how can you follow the command, “Don't be afraid” when this isn't always possible?

In every stage of life – whether young, old, rich, poor, confident or not – occasionally we all have to stand face to face with that nemesis of fear and worry. In childhood it might be the monsters who are hiding in the closet or under the bed. As adults it might be concerns about children, a job, or how you'll be able to live your days of retirement. And certainly the approach of death – a universal experience – causes everyone to fret and worry. Is it really possible to shore up your faltering faith enough at times like these? The answer is absolutely, “Yes!” For the God of Abram – the great I AM – has come to you yet one more time with the familiar words: “Do not be afraid!”

Sure, it's easy for God to say these words. Now what does He do to make it possible for you to do them? Look in today's Old Testament reading, where God was engaged in conversation with Abram after what was most certainly a frightening experience. Chapter 14 recounts an awful battle between a number of invading kings who eventually sacked the city of Sodom, pillaged its residents, and took Lot, Abram's nephew, into captivity. Abram had to take his own men into battle against them in order to rescue Lot and retrieve his possessions. So, when God came to Abram with the news that he was not to be fearful in the face of death, you might have expected him to recognize

God's providence and rejoice in God's mercy. But that isn't what happened.

Instead of responding in joy with thanksgiving, instead Abram replied with an answer that revealed the anguish and apprehension he was feeling. He questioned the Lord about how He would make good on a promise He had already delivered to him twice – that Abram and his wife, Sarah, would bring forth a son – an heir from their own bodies – who would carry to the people of the world the blessing Abram was destined to receive from God.

Though Abram trusted God, he was growing weary of waiting to receive what he yet had no evidence of – he was longing to see what had so far been hidden from his sight. Hebrews 11 begins, “faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Yet, even though Abram is praised for having just such a faith, it certainly wasn't always evident in his actions. It's important to see this shortcoming in Abram, because as you look at your own life you're going to have to admit that there many times when, like all of us, you also have a tendency to doubt God's promises or question God's actions – and this in spite of the fact that you may know full well that just as God established a relationship with Abram, He has also established a relationship with you.

This isn't something we like to talk about simply because it sounds good and pious, but it is nevertheless a reality to which each of us must cling, and on which we must place our hope. In Baptism, dear Christian, God adopted you and made you His child. And in those blessed waters God gives His children faith in His Son as their Savior from sin – a miracle He performs even with tiny infants who would otherwise have no way of believing in Christ as Savior, or of receiving the blessings such faith

bestows. In Baptism the righteousness of Christ is imputed to you. That means it's given to you free. It's placed over and on top of you, if you will – so that God might count you – like Abram – as righteous and holy. God established an eternal, everlasting peace between you and Him through the shared merits of His Son. And through His Son, God has forgiven you all your sin, and bestowed upon you an everlasting habitation with Him in heaven. Ultimately, He will raise your body to Christlike glory and usher in a new creation before your very eyes.

Because of all this you are now able to count on the Lord as your Shield and Exceedingly Great Reward. All that He has done for you in Christ is what enables you to trust Him completely – even though at times – when judged merely by outward appearances – there would be no logical reason for you to do so. Since we know from God's Word that He's already made good on His promise to save you in Christ, you can now also trust in Him to provide for you in all other areas of life as well. In other words, what we find in these passages – and throughout Scripture – is that God is constantly in the process of moving you from a state of fear to a stronger and steadfast faith.

And He does this because He is the great I AM – the First and the Last, the One and Only True God, the All Sufficient God, the One who is truly our Shield and Exceedingly Great Reward. But what exactly is this faith God gives you? Some have tried to assert that if you have enough faith you'll never be fearful of anything, you won't suffer any setbacks or difficulties, you'll be healthy, wealthy and wise – and life will be a veritable bed of roses. But if that's really what faith is, we'd all be in trouble – and as you may recall from the first part of this reading, so would Abram.

But the faith God gives is a faith that can see the invisible, believe the incredible, and receive the impossible. It can see things unseeable and trust in things too amazing to seriously consider.

That's because faith doesn't have to see something to believe it. How many of you were there when God created the heavens and the earth? How many of you were witnesses to Jesus' birth, where He took on our human flesh, lived, suffered, died and rose? Yet you confess these truths every time you speak the words of the Creed.

Our Lord Christ said to Thomas after he insisted on seeing proof of the resurrection, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." If you can believe God has already done the things He's done, how much more should you also then trust His promises to care for you? Even though you can't yet see the fulfillment of God's promises, through today's liturgy, He is here just the same to strengthen you so that you might learn to trust in Him for all things.

God once promised Abram that he would be the father of a great nation, and that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky – even though at the time Abram was 100 and Sarah was 90 – well beyond their child-bearing years! So, how's that for an incredible promise? But even though our Lord attributed to Abram the greatest of faith, what was his reaction? Was it not something like: "How can that be?" Yet in the end, in spite of the fact that God's promise was contrary to human reason and experience, Abram believed in God, the promise came to pass, and Abram's trust was counted as righteousness.

Dear friends, God is also calling you to trust Him for your future, and to firmly believe His promises even though you may never see their fulfillment in your lifetime. Does it not seem incredible that God can actually love you with an everlasting love, especially knowing how sinful and unclean we all are? Does it not also seem incredible that God would give His Only Begotten Son unto death for you so that you might be forgiven and live with Him forever – even though there's not a one of us who is deserving of so great a gift? Yes, those things

and more are incredible, but the fact still remains that no matter how bad things get – or how far you might stray due to weakness— God’s promise is still firm and unshakeable.

He is still your Shield and Exceedingly Great Reward. It seemed impossible to Abram that he could ever have a son, or be the father of a great nation at his age. Even so, it seems just as impossible to us today to know that even though we daily sin much, God still forgives us in Christ – and is even pleased to use us for the work of extending His kingdom. Do you see “impossible” hurdles before you? Do you have what seems like “insurmountable” problems? Do you have fear, anxiety and worries that won’t go away no matter how hard you try to get rid of them? Dear children of God, our Lord has already given you the faith to trust in Him in every conceivable circumstance.

And His mercy is what enables you to receive His assurance and courage, even in the most hopeless of situations. Remember, this is the same God who made the heavens and the earth and even now sustains them – the same God who sent His Son to save you from your sin and grant you the blessings of forgiveness and life eternal – the same God who sent His Word among us to keep and sustain you in times of trial and hardship. Would the God who has done all these things now turn away – leaving you lost and hurting after bringing you so far? Of course not! He is our Shield and our Exceedingly Great Reward. Through Him you have been given faith to see the invisible, believe the incredible, and receive the impossible. By His mighty power working through Word and Sacrament He has given you faith in the face of fear.

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.