

Lent 2B  
February 28, 2010  
Hymns: 339 - 523 - 434 - 282

**GENESIS 15:1-21**  
**DO YOU HEAR GOD TALKING?!**  
**\*Take God's Word To Heart.**  
**\*Find In God's Word Heart To Face Life.**

O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth - to Your praise - will declare Your Word. Amen!

Dear Hearers of God's Word,

Preschooler Ian loves the story in the Bible of the time God spoke to the boy Samuel. One night after his mother read Ian this story, she asked him if God had ever spoken to him. To her surprise, he answered, "Yes."

"What did God say to you?" his mother asked.

Ian thought and then said in his deepest voice, "Ian! Go to bed!"

Does God speak to people? What do you think? Unfortunately, there are way too many murders committed by people who claim that God told them to do it. It's like a tee-shirt you may have seen. It reads like this, "You're just jealous because the voices only talk to me . . ." It worries me when someone says, "God spoke to me and told me to do such-and-such . . ." Still the question remains, does God speak to people? The answer is yes. Most important of all, **(slide 1)** Do YOU Hear God Talking!?

God spoke to a man named Abram. We know him, of course, as Abraham. Abraham, by the way, is plural for Abram. The answer to the question, "Why God renamed Abram Abraham" is answered right here! According to the account in Genesis, God took Abram outside and said to him, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars--if indeed you can count them." Then God said to him, "So shall your offspring be." God renamed Abram Abraham, which is plural for Abram – because he would have innumerable descendants, physical descendants. Then, Moses, the writer of Genesis, adds these words, **(slide 2)** "*Abram believed the Lord, and God credited it to him as righteousness.*" You see, Abraham took God's Word to heart!

In the Bible, "righteousness" means "being right with God." The Bible teaches that Abram gained this right standing with God not by what he had done, but by what his great Descendant, the Christ, would do. To believe God, then, is more than to trust His power. To believe God is to trust His promise, to take Him at His Word, to throw oneself on His mercy. This trust God considers as having met His demands for perfection.

Now Abraham has innumerable spiritual descendants too, because.... **(slide 3)** *Those who believe are children of Abraham (Galatians 3:7).* God saves sinners not by transforming them into holy people but by declaring them holy. God credits their faith as righteousness. Sinners are saved by faith. Abram's faith rested on God's Word of promise, and so must our faith. That's the only safe foundation of faith. My feelings are not a reliable foundation for my faith. Feelings can mislead. There may actually be times in my life, for example, when I do not feel forgiven. But God's promise cannot mislead, because God cannot lie.

Do you hear God talking?! Does He speak to your heart? Do His sweet words of forgiveness and life in Jesus' cross comfort you in hours of sorrow over sin? Take God's Word to heart! Believe what the Scriptures reveal in accounts such as this between the Lord and Abraham! Believe as Abraham, and you will be a child of Abraham – a person of faith - assured of forgiveness and possessing the sure hope of heaven!

Secondly, **(slide 4)** **Find in God's Word Heart To Face Life.** Here in Genesis 15 we find a childless old man who had asked for help in believing the promise that his descendants would inherit the land of Canaan. Abram's request was not made in a spirit of doubt or unbelief. He believed God's promise, but he wanted reassurance in order that he might have the strength to face life. God's love found a way to assure His child!

He directed Abram to prepare the materials used in an ancient Babylonian blood covenant, the strongest guarantee known to Abram. If we are to understand the unusual transaction here involving three animals and two birds, we'll need to remember that Abram spent the first 75 years of his life in a Babylonian culture. In that society, when two people wanted to guarantee an important agreement, they did more than affix their signatures to a document. They enacted a blood covenant. One or more sacrificial animals were killed and the half carcasses laid on the ground facing each other, forming a sort of a corridor. To seal the covenant, the two parties would solemnly walk together between the slain animals.

The symbolism was clear. First of all, the two participants approached the covenant ceremony as equals. Each had to contribute something to put the covenant into effect. And secondly, if either of the persons violated the terms of the contract, the gory remains of the animal victims were a silent reminder that he would forfeit his life. As the details of God's vision to him unfolded, Abram saw himself slaughtering the animals and arranging the half carcasses in two rows, with one of the much smaller bird carcasses on each side. Now that all the preparations had been made, there only remained of the covenant ratification ceremony for the two participants to walk together between the carcasses.

Abram waited. In his vision he saw birds of prey swoop down on the bloody carcasses, and he drove them away. As the sun went down, Abram felt a strange feeling of terror. God explained that the birds of prey and Abram's anxiety indicated what would happen to his descendants. You know the stories of Jacob and Joseph and the children of Israel in Egypt and out in the wilderness of Sinai. Abraham, the father of the Israelite nation, could find relief to learn that God from on high was going to be guiding and protecting his descendants through four turbulent centuries of history, until they reached a happy outcome as possessors of the land on which he was now only pitching his tent.

But as twilight set in, what about the covenant ratification?! Just then Abraham saw a flaming torch (the form in which nomads usually saw fire) passing alone between the carcasses. And Abram heard God's reassuring voice: "To your descendants I give this land." During the centuries of the Old Testament God often appeared to His people in fire or in smoke or in a cloud to assure His people of His burning determination to carry out His great plan for them. The flaming torch, symbolizing the very presence of God, appeared all alone as it moved between the pieces of the sacrifice.

Friends, God's covenant of grace between Himself and Abraham and all believers is indeed an agreement between two parties, but the two are by no means equal partners. One party assumes all the obligations, and the other party receives all the benefits. Abram promised nothing, did nothing, said nothing. He merely observed what God was doing, he heard what the Lord was saying, and he believed it! St. Paul much later put into words what God was teaching Abram and us here: **(slide 5) *It is by grace you have been saved through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).***

In this Lenten season you and I witness a most dramatic further vision than did Abram. We see not just God walking between the sacrifices by Himself – We see God in Christ becoming the great sacrifice for our sins! We Preach Christ Crucified is the theme of our midweek and Holy Week special Services. We have adorned our chancel with a special artistic visual before the Lenten cross we traditionally place here in the front. Throughout the year we have the crucifix on the altar, the large cross over our chancel wall, and the beautiful colored glass cross on the south wall, through which the sun shines down on us in our worship. These crosses provide a visible symbol of the Savior God Who has made His promises of salvation to you and me in the cross of Christ.

In addition, we New Testament believers have received from God two very special visual blessings from God – in the Sacraments! In Baptism and the Lord's Supper God not only lets us hear the message of His mercy in

Christ, He gives us something to see – as He did here in our text with Abram. He connects earthly elements of water and bread and wine to His precious Word of promise, to make it all the more sure for us. By this visible sign God binds Himself to us in His promise.

**(slide 6)** Do you hear God talking? With ancient Abram, take God's Word to heart! Find heart to face life in the written, spoken, and visual/Sacramental Word of God! **“Look up at the heavens and count the stars . . .”** Then with Abraham, count your opportunities, not your obstacles. Look for the blessings hidden in your burdens. Focus on your Maker and not on the mess you've made of your life. This is what faith is all about. And remember, it was by faith that Abraham was justified. It is by faith that our lives will be victorious. Amen.

May our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, Who loves us and by His Word of grace has given us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word! Amen!

Children's Sermon

Object: a coin (preferably a half-dollar or silver dollar!)

Good morning, boys and girls:

How many of you have ever flipped a coin to decide something? For instance, you want to watch one television show, and your brother or sister wants to watch another television show, so you flipped a coin to see who would get to watch what. That's a fun way of making a decision. Hundreds and hundreds of years ago, the people of Rome used to make all their decisions like that. If they were going to buy a house, or get married, or move to another country, they made that important decision by flipping a coin. The Roman coins had a picture of the famous emperor Julius Caesar on them. The Roman people used to think that if they flipped a coin, and it turned up heads, then they were making the right decision. Now that seems like a pretty stupid way to make a really important decision. There is a much better way. It goes like this. Pray about any decision you have to make. Then think very carefully about what the right decision will be. Then go ahead and trust the God will be with you however the decision turns out.

Once there lived a man named Abraham. One day God told him to look up and count the stars. Then God told him that he could always trust God. And that's true of you and me. Rather than flip a coin, say a prayer, make your decision and then trust God to be with you however the decision turns out.