

Faith not Sight

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 11 February 2007

Preacher: The Venerable Daniel Gifford

[0 : 00] Well, it's great to be able to be part of these baptisms today and for all of us to witness them. As I said, it's wonderful to see the work of God in several different generations.

And those baptisms that we saw today are really the fruit of God's work, often over many years, coming forth into this public declaration of being united to Jesus Christ.

So it's a very significant thing that we're seeing today. We're looking back and seeing what God has done for those who are youth and adults. And for the babies, we are looking ahead and we are hoping and praying that this faith will become theirs as well.

The story for all of them is the same in baptism. That God offers all of the spiritual blessings of heaven and earth in the sign of baptism.

It points to Jesus. He has died for them. The perfect sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. He has risen from the dead in great power so that today He forgives people.

[1 : 10] And He gives them an eternal relationship with Him. And that is your story as well, if you have placed your trust in Jesus. We are, as I marked people with the cross, as Christ's own forever.

That's the new relationship or covenant. It's all about what Jesus has done for us so that we can call God our Heavenly Father and belong to Him forever.

And so today we are celebrating this initiating work of God in providing these incredible blessings for us. But not only do we celebrate the wonder of Jesus doing that, we also celebrate the fact that daily God brings His change into the lives of those who are Christ's own forever.

There is a renovation work happening in each of us. This is God's blessing to those who believe. That has happened in the lives of the youth and adults who were baptized.

They have studied the Bible. They have been to Sunday school. They have been to D.C. In different ways they have heard the gospel of Jesus. And God has been working in their lives.

[2 : 25] A good work has begun in them. And God is going to fulfill it. That's the promise of baptism. Philippians 1.6 tells us, Paul says, He prays with confidence that God who has begun a good work in you will carry it out onto completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

And so what that's saying is everyone, each one of you, is a renovation project of Jesus. He is in the process of making us new people.

He has started a good work and will complete it. Our family life at home is such that Catherine and I have two little kids who are four years old and one and a half.

And so we don't have the free time for some reason that we used to have. And we don't watch TV much. There's one little hour we carve out of the week in which we do.

We sit down, we watch one program. It's a very spiritual program called Extreme Home Makeover. And there's something about a fantasy of watching that.

[3 : 36] But if you know the show, what happens is that a house that is in very bad shape with a very deserving family, the house is torn down as the family is off in Disneyland or somewhere.

And a new house is completely finished and furnished in less than a week. And it is extreme both because of how quickly the new house is built, but also because of the massive change in that house.

And there's always a dramatic scene at the end of the hour-long program where the family see it for the first time and they are overwhelmed by this huge change.

Now, I want to say that the change that God is working in us is both more extreme than that and much less extreme as well.

It is extreme because God rescues every Christian from spiritual death to life in which we live to God, which is the way that Paul describes baptism, living to God.

[4 : 43] Not only that, but we look for Jesus to come again. We will see the one who we have been united to. And we will be like him, the Bible says. We will receive a resurrection body.

The Bible talks of it as being clothed with a heavenly dwelling. And that we will bear the likeness of the man of heaven, who is Jesus Christ.

That is an extreme change. You know, that is something beyond our imagination. Now, the not-so-extreme part of the transformation and renovation in us is that he forms us daily.

He teaches us to trust, obey, and take on the character of Christ. And if you talk to people around you, and probably you tell yourself this as well, you realize that this is a long-term project.

And it seems to stop and start. It is one that happens in a lot less time than we would like. And a lot less time, or a lot more time than we would like.

[5 : 50] It takes a lot longer than people around us would like as well. It is a working, a remaking of who we are that happens at times it feels like a snail's pace.

Because we are slow to give up ungodly ways. We are slow to trust, slow to obey, and slow to do what God calls us to do.

And yet, if you are able to see, to look back, and see what has happened in your life as you have trusted God, you will see that a powerful change has been taking place in your heart and your mind and the way you live your life.

In fact, I think it's a very good exercise, which not a lot of us do, to actually talk to people who trust, who know the Lord, and who know you, and to ask them how they have seen God work in your life. How have they seen God's changes over the year? It's a great exercise, because what you will see is that even a little bit of faith brings about God's blessing and his change.

[7 : 02] You know, somebody might say, well, you don't act like a very good Christian. You can very easily say at that point, well, you would hate to see me then if I didn't know the Lord, if he wasn't doing his renovation work.

Because that is what he's doing. He is changing us into his likeness. Now, Abraham, I think, is a great life encouragement to us, to anyone who is anxious or impatient with the timing of God's work in their life.

We saw last week that Abraham really hits the ground running. You know, God calls him out of the blue and speaks to him and tells him to leave everything, go to a land that he has for him that he hasn't seen yet.

And then God told him that he would make him a great nation, he would bless him, and through him, the nations of the world would be blessed. Well, that's hitting the ground running.

And Abraham wonderfully follows him. He just picks up and goes. And the wonderful thing, too, is that this amazing promise is given to the most unlikely of persons, as David talked about last week in a sermon.

[8 : 15] Here is somebody who's 75 years old, his wife is infertile, and he is a moon worshiper. I didn't know they were called moonies until last week, but that's what David said, so it must be.

And so he's a moon worshiper. In a way, it's a situation similar to baptism, because baptism is a sign that all the blessings of God in Jesus Christ are being given to the child or the adult who can do nothing to earn this wonderful gift.

We are all unlikely candidates to have our sins forgiven and for God to love us each so completely. And our only response to his initiative is to trust him.

And that is what we are called to do very simply. It is to trust him with thanksgiving. This is our part of the covenant. This is what the adults were agreeing to in the baptism today.

Baptism doesn't save the person. Jesus, in whom we have faith and trust, saves us. And you see, in the same way, Abraham's response to the promise of God can only be to trust him, thankfully, and his promises.

[9 : 35] And as I said, he starts out well by going to Canaan, but as soon as tough times hit there, he said, oh, it must be over. God's gone. The blessings are gone. And immediately, he goes back to his old ways, taking matters into his own hands.

And we saw last week that he left the promised land, he goes to Egypt, he lies to Pharaoh about his wife, about being married to his wife, Sarah, in order to save his skin, and she's taken off to Pharaoh's harem.

The promises and the blessings seem very far away at this point. In fact, Abraham is about as untrusting in God as you can get, not to mention the fact that he is cowardly and he is deceitful.

So we see humanity at its worst at that point. And really, Abraham is a lot like us. We have God's promises in Jesus. His blessings belong to us.

Yet, if you are like me, you often fail to trust in him. And your character does not match up to what God calls you to. But that is why we are so thankful for God's grace.

[10:49] And this chapter, 14, is about God's grace. God rescues Abraham from his ridiculous decisions. And Abraham actually learns how to trust God over time.

In the last chapter, 13, when land couldn't support both Lot and Abraham's herdsmen, Abraham trusted God. He let Lot take the part of the land in the Transjordan Valley that was beautiful. It was fertile. It looked like a garden. And Abraham chooses what he did not see yet. And yet, God blessed him because of it. And then, in the passage from today, Genesis 14, we see there is a new challenge to the covenant.

And it has to do with war and violence. Chapter 14, and we just read part of it because I think 1 through 7 would get you tongue-tied reading it. So we had mercy on the readers this morning. And that chapter is about five rebel kings who are not far away from Abraham. They refuse to pay tribute to four very powerful tyrant kings way out in the west.

[11:57] And those kings send a force over to raid the whole region. And they do. And they come to Sodom and Gomorrah and they pillage the city and they take the people away from there and they rout the armies.

And, unfortunately, Lot and his family is taken away as well. They are kidnapped and all their possessions. Well, word comes to Abram in verse 14, if you can look down there.

And as you see, he leads forth his trained men born in the house, 318 to be precise. It's not a big force, although it's not as small by those standards as it would be today.

Well trained with allies. And what he does is he, in a very brilliant night battle, defeats these marauders that have come.

And he chases them back where they came from and then he rescues Lot. He brings Lot and his family and all the goods of those cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, which are pretty awful cities even at that time, and brings them back.

[13:06] Now I want to tell you, if you are to read that carefully, that whole chapter, you will see something very interesting because it actually sounds like a CNN account of violence in the Middle East.

It is a secular account. There is no mention of God whatsoever in that description. And that omission of God is deliberate by the person who is writing, by Moses who is writing this. It shows what the battles and international relations in the world looks like through the world's eyes. God doesn't come into it. It is all about powerful kings.

It is all about this incredible strategic maneuver by Abraham himself. But an extraordinary person comes into the picture in verse 18.

And he reveals what actually has happened throughout that chapter. His name is Melchizedek. And that name means king of righteousness.

[14:11] This is a mysterious figure. We don't know anything about him before and we don't hear about him afterwards. And he is unique for a couple of reasons. Universally, the kings around there were bad, but he is the king of righteousness.

He is known for his goodness. Not only that, but he is from a very obscure little place called Salem. And Salem means peace. So his kingdom was one of peace.

That is the place probably where Jerusalem would become the holy city, which is very interesting. That's the root, Salem, which is in Jerusalem. Yet God makes this king his priest.

Even though he is obscure, he makes him his priest long before there are any priests among the Hebrew people. He is unique as well because never again will God combine or allow combining a priest and a king in one person.

Never again until Jesus Christ comes and he is designated by God as the great high priest, the one who brings us into the presence of God and he is designated by God as the king of kings and the lord of lords.

[15:26] And so this man is a signpost pointing to Jesus Christ who will come and bring about the promises of God in himself. And so this priest king appears out of the blue with King Sodom who is a great contrast.

You know, he is about as bad a king as you can get. And Melchizedek gives Abraham a feast fit for a king. That's what wine and bread mean. It is a full feast welcoming him.

And then he blesses Abram in verse 19. And it's interesting what he says. He says he blessed him and said blessed be Abraham by God most high maker of Hamed and on earth.

Well, does that sound familiar? Those are the words that God uses when he says I will bless you. And Melchizedek confirms that. Not only that, he goes on to say blessed be God most high who has delivered your enemies into your hands.

And you see what is going on here. There's a revelation that comes only from God. Not only is God continuing to bless Abraham but he is actually blessing the world already.

[16:40] What God is showing here is that God is in charge of those nine kings. And God won the battle for Abraham showing that he was greater than those nine kings. And God even rescued the rotten king Sodom who showed up with Melchizedek.

And that's what is revealed. That is the true account of what happened in chapter 14. That God is over all of it. That his hand is directing the things that happen and that the enemy is delivered into Abraham's hand.

And so what we see now is that Abraham is blessing the nations even who are very far away from God spiritually like Sodom. And he is restoring that which was destroyed and stolen and he rescues Lot.

Now Abraham knows that Melchizedek's words are God's word. And because he hears that his faith is strengthened, he hears God's word repeated.

Abraham is blessed by God. God is blessing the nations. And Melchizedek confirms the promises of God because he represents God and who he is, his righteousness and his peace and his kingship.

[17:55] Now the wonderful thing about hearing God's word is that it strengthens Abraham's faith and he responds in this amazing way. He immediately gives Melchizedek a tithe.

Do you see that at the end of verse 20? Abraham gives him a tenth of everything to Melchizedek, this very obscure person, because he recognizes that this person brings the word of God.

And wonderfully, that is stuff that used to belong to King Sodom. And in a way, he's causing King Sodom to give a tithe to God. It is a response of thankful trust by Abraham, recognizing that God has given this authority to Melchizedek, and that he has delivered his enemies, that it is God's victory.

And then he tells King Sodom something wonderful. You know, King Sodom is very disrespectful. He says, give me the persons in verse 21, but take the goods for yourself.

But Abraham, in verse 22, says to King of Sodom, I have sworn to the Lord God Most High, maker of heaven and earth, that I will not take a thread or a sandal thong or anything that is yours, lest you should say, I have made Abram rich.

[19:09] And I think here is where you see the renovation of Abram by God. Because we don't see him anymore as the cowardly, untrusting, and disloyal person of chapter 12.

Instead, he trusted God to take this great risk of rescuing Lot with an inferior force, and in that rescue, we see loyalty to Lot and great courage.

And when he comes back as the victor, he wants God alone, not an earthly king, to get any glory for any of his success or wealth. And instead of seeking to acquire wealth, Abraham gives it away and he uses it to thank God and to trust him.

That is a profound change. And that is what God has been doing through all of these international events. In fact, if you just look at the very beginning of chapter 15, in one sentence you see God's purpose revealed for all that has happened for Abraham.

He says this, verse 1, Fear not, Abram, I am your shield, your reward shall be very great. And I think this is probably a very good place for me to conclude this sermon because that word, that purpose is God's purpose for us as well as Abraham.

[20:36] Jesus, who is our king and priest, calls us to replace our fear with faith and trust in him. And to know that he is our shield.

We live in Christ. He is the one who rewards us, who surrounds us with his presence and his blessings. And this, I think, goes to the heart of the Christian faith. Every day, God is remaking us so that we more and more place our confidence in him alone.

The Bible says that our love for God and our trust in him casts out all fear. And this is the work that God is bringing us to, that we would cast out fear and be thankfully trusting in him, as Abraham is. Now, Abraham was tempted to fear by material needs, by famine, by threats of powerful enemies, and by the uncertainty of whether he will ever have a baby boy.

Will those promises come true? Because it hasn't happened yet, it's been years. The uncertainty is always in the background. He is always tempted to wonder whether there was any way God would keep his promise and bless him and make him a great nation that would bless the world.

[21 : 51] And yet, in this chapter, we see that in the time of fear, in the time of things coming against what has been promised, Abraham trusts God to be his shield and to be the one who would reward him and bless him.

And that's why there is this transformation in Abraham. We may face different uncertainties. We might face different material needs and different threats to the promises of God in our life. But like Abraham, they tempt us to fear and not trust God or his promises. And God's word is there for us to be strengthened.

God's word through Melchizedek and through what he did in Abraham's life teaches us today that he is worthy of our trust, that God changes us as we trust his promise.

And the power of God is such that the times we are tempted to be fearful are the very times that God strengthens our trust in him and brings his extensive renovation into your life and my life.

[23 : 02] And the very fact that we belong to Jesus, that he has defeated the power of death and brought us into God's presence because he is the high priest and king, is proof that God is our shield, that he is the one who rewards us, that Jesus is the place of blessing.

And that's why we can pray with David, Psalm 18, and I'll close with this. Psalm 18 at the beginning says this, I love you, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer.

My God is my rock in whom I take refuge. He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I call to the Lord who is worthy of praise, and I am saved from my enemies.

God grant us grace to know his powerful renovating work in us, and to respond to him with loving, thankful trust, because he is our rock and our shield.

Amen.