

Sermon February 21, 2016 Lent 2 "Heavenly Citizenship" Genesis 15:1-18 Philippians 3:17 - 4:1

Our opening hymn this morning was, "Standing On the Promises," the second verse of which we sang:

"Standing on the promises that cannot fail, when the howling storms of doubt and fear assail, by the Living Word of God I shall prevail, standing on the promises of God."

The scripture lessons we heard today both stand with this hymn. Paul, writing to the Christians of Philippi, urged them to pattern their lives according to the citizenship they have in heaven, through Christ, and NOT according to the prevailing standards of the world around them. Stand on GOD's promises, live according to what Jesus has done for you; don't let your life have as its goal the goals of greed and destructions (the goal of the belly) so many in this world claim....

The reading from Genesis showed us Abram, later called Abraham, as he struggled to believe God's promise in the face of a reality which seemed only to deny it. God had promised Abram that God would make of him a great nation and give a land to his descendants, back in Chapter 12 when he had been 75 years old. But much time had passed, and there were still no babies. So when God mentioned that Abram would be rewarded by God for his faithfulness in dealing with Melchizedek in today's reading, Abram protested: "O Lord, what will you give me, for I continue childless. A slave born in my house will have to be my heir." (REALITY)

The question arises: *Is it possible to trust God even when the evidence is to the contrary?*

Abram offered no smiling facade to God; he blurted out to God how impossible it all seemed.

God met his questioning with a promise: "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir....Look toward the heavens and count the stars, if you are able. So shall your descendants be." And Abram believed the Lord.

There's the miracle. Abram believed that for which he had no proof, no baby for years, nothing but the promise of God. (pause) Years more passed before Abraham and Sarah had ANY proof. The baby Isaac finally arrives in the 21st chapter of Genesis. God's word was indeed worthy of trust. As Frederick Beuchner once wrote, old Sarah made it from the geriatric ward to the maternity ward, and the old couple named their son Isaac, which means "laughter." (*Wishful Thinking*, p. 29) Their citizenship was of heaven!

In the New Testament, Paul called his fellow Christians to trust that Jesus' way of going through life was better than the ways of greed and destruction around them. He couldn't promise them instant rewards if they lived out their faith in their daily lives, but he could tell them that by setting their hearts on something higher than earthly things, they could participate in "heavenly citizenship." "Therefore, my brothers and sisters,.. stand firm in the Lord..."

Heavenly citizenship.

The chances are that none of us here has been called by God to such incredible tasks or opportunities as giving birth to a baby at the age of ninety or a hundred. We probably haven't been told that our descendants will have some spectacular identity or effect in the world. And our situations may not be as overtly challenging as were those of the early Christians, where to

confess themselves to be believers in the risen Christ could have caused them the loss of a job, the breakup of a family, persecution, or even death. But even if we haven't had to face such dramatic challenges, each of us has been faced - perhaps frequently - with the question of whether or not we believe that God's promises are true for us. Am I a citizen only of this world that I can see, touch, describe, and read about? Or is there something larger, the kingdom of God, to which I ultimately belong? Can I really trust God? MY ANSWER IS DECLARED AS I LIVE OUT MY LIFE, BY THE WAY I LIVE. Christ's kingdom may not be **OF** this world, but it is made knowable by the way his followers live their lives **IN** this world.

Pope Francis's statement this week that a person who builds walls against others is not being Christian has raised all kinds of havoc, but apart from the political personalities involved, his statement is true. Our ACTIONS reveal our citizenship. This is true for every one of us, whether we're running for political office or just making our way through life.

A pastor told about how, as a teenager, he had asked his church's Director of Christian Education how a person could ever know what God was calling him/her to do in life. The woman replied, "Where the needs of the world cross with your God-given gifts, that is your call." To approach every day with willingness to answer such calls as this is to accept "heavenly citizenship." It is to live out life acting on God's promises and seeking to love others and God in the name of Jesus. (source unknown)

Years ago preacher/late Bishop William Willimon told about a woman named Addie, who was a member of a Methodist Church in the South. In mid-life, from out of nowhere, Addie was laid low by a rare and crippling disease. In less than a year, she was transformed from a typically active woman to a paralyzed, bed-ridden person. Addie prayed, "God, I am terrified by what has happened and by what may happen. Help me to find a way to live, to trust you, and to serve you, despite my infirmity." Years passed. Addie spent them serving her church by doing one of the few activities she was able to engage in: talking on the telephone. She could not walk, run, or move about her house, but she was able to dial a telephone. Before every church meeting, members of the committees received a reminder call from Addie. When someone was sick, that person received daily calls from Addie. Every older member of the congregation who was confined to home received a morning call from Addie. Addie explained, "I try to keep the phone going when my legs won't go, and God blesses me in what I do." (first told by William Willimon) Addie was able to see beyond her disappointments and struggles in life. She was able to trust God in spite of what had happened to her. She lived out her heavenly citizenship.

Writer Sam Ervin, Jr., said this about faith: "Faith is not a storm cellar to which men and women can flee for refuge from the storms of life. It is, instead, an inner force that gives them the strength to face those storms and their consequences with serenity of spirit."

Jesus counseled his followers not to worry about the "tomorrows" of their lives, but to live trusting that the God who loves them also knows what they need and will provide it. From Luke 12:22: "Do not be anxious about your life... for life is more than food, and the body more than clothing....Consider the ravens...Do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be of anxious mind. For all the nations of the world seek these things; and your Father knows that

you need them. Instead, seek God's kingdom, and these things shall be yours as well..."

We stand on God's promises. No matter what, God is with us; we are not alone. We will live and die and live again through the Word of God. May we hear God's calls to us, every day, as we dare to trust, and as we use God's gifts however we can to meet the needs of the world around us. Heavenly citizenship means LIFE now, as we dare to follow and imitate Jesus. Some day, by his grace, we will exchange it all for a crown!! Thanks be to God! Amen.