

Midweek Advent #1
December 4, 2002
Genesis 15:6

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

Good evening! I am Abraham, the man you know from your Bibles as the father of all believers. I've come to your church tonight to bring you season's greetings. When I say, "Season's Greetings," the season I refer to is the season of Advent, the season of hope and expectation and patient waiting for Christmas. You, see I know something about hope and expectation and patient waiting.

My seasonal greeting for you this Advent is a simple one, just three words: **Keep the faith!** The faith I'm talking about is a very specific one, faith that the one true God always keeps his promises, including his most precious promise to send one of my descendants to be the Savior of all people. Two thousand years before the birth of the Messiah, when I was living in places like Haran and Hebron and Beersheba, I lived in this faith that you have right now. Though I was looking ahead to Jesus' coming and you are looking back at it, it was the same faith.

But before I go any farther in talking about my experience with waiting for the Savior, I want to correct a common misconception about me. Sometimes people portray me as such a tower of faith that you could almost get the impression I didn't need a Savior. Well, I'm here to tell you that nothing could be farther from the truth! I'm not big on, as you say, "hauling out one's dirty laundry" but what I'm about to tell you is public knowledge. It's written in your Bibles. I have to admit that there was a time in my life that I was so afraid for my own well-being that I lied that my beautiful wife, Sarah, was my sister. Now it's true that she really was my *half*-sister, but we were also husband and wife, and that part I didn't mention when I went to Egypt with Sarah. Just as I had guessed, when we got to Egypt, Sarah's great beauty got her noticed, by none other than the Pharaoh of Egypt. When Pharaoh wanted her to become one of his wives, I continued to act as if she was just my sister. I even accepted gifts from Pharaoh intended to honor Sarah's "brother." It wasn't until the LORD inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh's household that questions were asked and my little deception came to light. I shudder to think what could have happened to Sarah. And I'm ashamed to recall what a poor witness to my faith I gave to Pharaoh and his household. But what I really regret to have to admit is that years later, I did almost the same thing all over again with Abimelech, the king of Gerar. I could almost blush with shame right now when I remember Abimelech saying to me, **"You have done things to me that should not be done."** (Gen. 20:9)

Sarah and I both experienced lapses of faith. You know, too, about the day she suggested that I take her maidservant, Hagar, and raise up a family through her. And I agreed with her! But what painful and disastrous consequences that idea had! I think of the rivalry that arose between Hagar and Sarah and the rivalry between my son by Sarah, Isaac, and my son by Hagar, Ishmael. It was all due to my weakness of faith. What misery we bring on ourselves when we stray from God's will like I did! No, it's clear: I needed a Savior just like you do. The inclination of our heart's is evil from childhood. Without the LORD's promises, there'd be no hope for any of us.

But, thank the LORD, we do have his promises. God's promises came to me all undeserved. My own father, Terah, was an idol-worshiper. Yet, out of all the people on earth, motivated by nothing but his grace, the LORD chose me for an amazing array of blessings. When I was still living in Haran the LORD said to me, "**Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.**" (Gen. 12:3) I didn't even know where I was going, but that was OK because his promises sustained me. He told me, "**I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.**" (Gen. 12:2-3) That wasn't just one promise; it was seven promises rolled into one. And it enabled me to keep the faith as I set out on my journey with Sarah and my nephew, Lot. Finally, we arrived in Canaan and the LORD said, "To your offspring I will give this land." I myself never owned more of the land than the cave of Machpelah where Sarah and I were buried. But in a few centuries, my descendants were numbered in the millions and the LORD led them out of Egypt through the desert to take possession of Canaan. That's the first reason why my seasonal greeting for you is, "Keep the faith." I can tell you firsthand that when God makes a promise, he keeps it.

Sometimes it takes the LORD a while to keep his promises. When the LORD first told me that a son from my own body would be my heir, I was already an old man. But God didn't give us a child right then. Years passed. Sarah and I got older. Humanly speaking, the likelihood of our having a child had disappeared altogether. But the LORD kept faith alive with his promises. "**I will make you very fruitful,**" he said to me when I was ninety-nine years old. Can you believe it? Finally, when I was a hundred years old, Sarah gave birth to our son, Isaac. We called him Isaac because it means "laughter." God brought us laughter through the birth of our son. Who would have believed that we would experience the joys of parenthood at our advanced age? This is the second reason why I tell you to keep the faith. Even if in his wisdom he makes you wait for years, the LORD will always keep his promises. No one should be foolish enough to hang on to a faith that's futile. But faith in God's promises is never futility or disappointment.

The biggest test of my faith was still to come, however. When Isaac was still a boy, God came to me one day and told me to go to Mount Moriah and offer my

son as a burnt offering. I had never known the LORD to be interested in human sacrifice. The very idea of it is shocking. But the LORD wanted to know whether I feared him, or—now that I had my long-awaited son—whether the boy was more important to me than the LORD and his word. Of course, I didn't say a word about this to Sarah. The next morning I got up and took Isaac and headed for Moriah. As we walked, I wrestled with this command from the LORD. How could he promise me an heir, more than that, promise me that the Savior of the world would be one of my descendants, and then command me to kill my son? But I reasoned that God could raise the dead. If he commands me to kill the son of the promise, then he's going to have to raise him up again, because the LORD never breaks his promises. I'll tell you, I was almost overcome with emotion when Isaac said to me on the way up the hill, **"The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"** I couldn't very well say, "My son, you are the lamb." I just shared with him my own conviction. I told him, **"God himself will provide a lamb for the burnt offering, my son."** (Gen 22:8) And that's what happened. I came so close! I had built the altar and arranged the wood. I had bound Isaac and laid him on the altar. I had the knife poised to cut my son's throat when the angel of the LORD called out to me, **"Abraham! Abraham! Do not lay a hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."** And I looked up and there in the thicket was a ram caught by its horns. I took the ram and sacrificed it instead of Isaac. And then I gave that place a name. I called it, The LORD Will Provide.

I know you're still waiting for the LORD to keep some of the promises he's made to you. Some of you are waiting on God to keep his promise not to permit you to be tempted beyond what you can bear. Others are trusting that God, who works in all things for the good of those who love him, will work for good even in your current difficult circumstances. As you put the priorities of your life in order, you're going on God's promise that those who seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness will have "all these things" given to them as well. And, of course, each of you is living in the faith that our sins have been put away, that we've been ransomed from sin and death by innocent sacrifice of God's true Lamb, Jesus. You're living each day in the confident faith that death is not the end of our existence. You fully expect that when God brings your life on this earth to an end, that your soul will be gathered to heaven, to join me at the banquet of eternal life. And consequently, during this Advent season and every day, you're living in hope and expectation, you're patiently waiting for Jesus to come again. My encouragement to you is simple. It's based on my personal experience, and not only mine but the experience of believers down through the ages. But more than that, it's based on God's unbroken record of faithfulness: **Keep the faith! Be sure of what you hope for. Be certain of what you do not see. I can tell you to keep the faith, because I know that God with his promises will keep you in the faith. Amen.**