

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

August is marriage month in my family. All of us in my immediate family who are currently married, two of my sisters, my parents, and Helen and I, were married in August. And then just this week I realized that this year is my parent's 63rd anniversary and Helen and my 36th. Every 11 years the digits in our anniversary years are reversed, so that their 52nd anniversary was our 25th, and if they make it to 74, that will be the year of our 47th. It's some weird thing that happens with years that are 27 years apart. Anyway, August being anniversary month is probably what prompted me to make a connection to marriage as I pondered our texts this week, especially in the first two readings. Those readings are all about promises and trust, which is another word for faith.

Marriages are based on promises and trust. The Genesis reading is from the Abraham story, which starts with God calling Abraham to leave his home and set out for a land that God promised to give to him, where God promised to make of him a great nation. And Abraham did it! The short version of the story is that Abraham trusted God's promises and God delivered on those promises. The long version takes up 13 chapters of Genesis, a quarter of the book, with plenty of suspense and twists and turns.

But that got me to wondering, and not for the first time: "why wasn't the story simpler, and shorter? Why didn't it move quickly from the promise to the fulfillment? Why did it take 25 years, until Abraham and Sarah were 100 years old, before they finally were able to have a child? Why all those stories in between – the story of them going down to Egypt, of Abraham passing off Sarah as his sister – the story of them having a child by Sarah's slave, Hagar – and the multiple stories of God having to repeat the promise?"

Abraham is wondering that too in today's reading. Why the delay? He's in a difficult spot in his relationship with God. He's done what God asked, left his home and traveled to this new land, and still there is no child, no prospect of descendants. And this is only three chapters in! Abraham has no idea how much of the story is still left. This brief interlude ends with another promise. That's all Abraham gets for now. And it will have to be enough.

Our Hebrews reading continues the theme, but it sees the goal of God's promises throughout the Hebrew Scriptures as being fulfilled in Jesus Christ. And that took even more time than Abraham and Sarah had to endure. Their 25-year wait was a blink of an eye by comparison. Generation after generation for over a thousand years lived on a promise that they never saw fulfilled in their lifetimes. And did you catch that the writer of Hebrews compares their experience to that of refugees and migrants? The whole of the Abraham story is a migrant story to begin with, a story that includes being refugees. The exodus story that comes in the next book of the Bible is a story of immigrant refugees being oppressed and exploited by the native population in Egypt. And so Hebrews takes these foundational stories and casts the whole history of God's people in this light. How have we missed this in contemporary American Christianity? To follow God's call is to live as a migrant and refugee in this world, seeking a new homeland, desiring a better country.

Jesus is the fulfillment of the promise of life that God has been making from the beginning of the world. But that claim of the Book of Hebrews is a statement of faith, because the promise is still in process. It has not yet been fulfilled, and we are still on a journey. We are still called to live by faith, like Abraham and Sarah, to trust in the promises that God has made to us through our baptism into Jesus.

And it needs to be said that this faith is something very specific, based on specific promises. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for," our reading begins, "the conviction of things not seen."

You've heard this before. It's a famous biblical quote. But too often this verse is left to stand on its own. It's what Christians will say is what it means to have faith in God – to believe in something that you don't have evidence for. It's what atheists will also say in their criticism of faith, maybe because they've heard Christians define it that way. But the Christian faith is not simply believing in what you can't see. People believe all kinds of nonsense that they don't have evidence for, and that causes all kinds of unnecessary grief. The Alex Jones saga that's been in the news this last week is just one horrific case in point. The faith of the biblical witness, the faith of the gospel of Jesus Christ, is about specific promises of God to us that we are asked to trust until those promises are fulfilled. In the case of Abraham and Sarah, it was a specific promise that they would have a child and be the ancestors of a great nation. Some of that promise they got to see fulfilled in their long lifetimes. They got that child, Isaac, who would later become the father of Jacob and the grandfather of the children of Israel. But they did not see the promise of becoming a great nation fulfilled. And yet it was. In our case, as those baptized in to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and called to follow him, it's the promise that true life, the good life, the life that were created to live, is life that is not self-centered, not focused on the accumulation of wealth, not ruled by fear of others who might take our accumulated wealth away. Instead, true life is focused outwardly on positive, caring relationship with God and with one another. It is the promise that Jesus Christ, who embodied God's promise in his own human life, destroyed the power of sin, death, and evil by his death and resurrection. And it is the promise that nothing in all of creation can separate us from God's love in him.

The life of faith is a call to live in the present moment trusting that sin, death, and evil have been disarmed, even as they continue to rage all around us. We are called to trust in the promise that the end of the world's story has already been written, that our future is secure, and that we are free to live without fear, opened to loving the world that God loves in Jesus Christ.

And that brings me back to the marriage analogy. Married couples live by a promise – a specific promise to one another to share their lives and to be faithful to each other. That is a tall order, a hard promise to keep. Ask anyone who has been married. And that promise is often violated, in ways big and small, even in marriages that last through the years. And it takes both partners sticking with the plan. No one person can take credit for a lasting marriage. This is true for friendships too if the marriage analogy doesn't work so well for you, although friendships seldom have the explicit promises that come with marriage. In our relationship with God, God is the partner whose faithfulness is guaranteed and whom we are bound to disappoint with our unfaithfulness. But God is so committed to this relationship that God will not allow our unfaithfulness be the last word. God is continually forgiving us and continually trying to win us back.

Here's where I'm ultimately going with this: We're marking 63 years of my parents' marriage next week, and 36 of our own. But that was not the goal of our marriages, to make it to 63 years or to 36 years. There is no prize to be won. The goal of marriage is the life that is lived in the meantime, between the wedding day and the latest anniversary. And that, brothers and sisters, is also true of the life of faith. We've often portrayed the life of faith as securing the prizes of heaven and eternal life. But I think that that is a mistake. The life of faith is not a means to an end. To live with love and integrity in relation to God and one another is the goal. The goal is now. Whatever comes next is in God's hands, and in God's promise. The point of the promise is abundant life right here and right now even in the midst of sorrow and pain and disappointment, life that is already ours to live today, and in the endless days yet to come. May God grant us grace to live by faith in that promise. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto live everlasting. Amen.