

Romans 4:1-8, 13-17 (Second Sunday in Lent—Series A)
“Certain of Our Righteousness in Christ”
Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer, Enfield, CT
March 5, 2023

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text is the Epistle lesson recorded in Romans 4.

¹What then will we say Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, found? ²For if Abraham was declared righteous from works, he has a boast, but not before God. ³For what is the Scripture saying? *And Abraham believed in God and it was credited to him for righteousness.* ⁴Now to the one who works, the payment is not credited as a gift, but according to what is owed. ⁵But to the one who is not working but is believing on the One who declares the ungodly righteous, his faith is being credited for righteousness, ⁶just as David also speaks the blessing of the person to whom God is crediting righteousness without works: ⁷*Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven and whose sins are covered over.* ⁸*Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will surely not count.* . . . ¹³For the promise to Abraham and his seed, that he would be the heir of the world, was not through the Law but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴For if the heirs are from the Law, the faith has been emptied and the promise is made ineffective and void. ¹⁵For the Law brings wrath, but where the Law is not, neither is transgression. ¹⁶On account of this the promise is from faith, in order that it is according to grace, so that the promise is certain to every seed, not to the one from the Law only, but also to the one who is from the faith of Abraham who is father of all of us, ¹⁷just as it stands written, *I have made you the father of many nations*, in the presence of whom he believed God, the One who makes the dead alive and calls the things not existing so that they are existing.

The apostle Paul begins our text today with a question: “What then will we say Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, found?” Let’s explore this question and text together this morning.

Is it true that Abraham found that God chose him because he feared the one true God? No, this is FALSE. Joshua 24:2 tells us, “And Joshua said to all the people, Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods’” (ESV). Abraham did not fear the one true God. He didn’t worship the Lord, Yahweh. Luther wrote, “For if you should ask what Abraham was before he was called by a merciful God, Joshua answers that he was an

idolater, that is, that he deserved death and eternal damnation. But in this wretched state God does not cast him away; He calls him and through the call makes everything out of him who is nothing.”¹

God chose Abraham simply out of His gracious favor. Moses records by the power of the Holy Spirit in our Old Testament Reading, “Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed’” (Gen. 12:1–3 ESV). God alone is the actor. Abraham, in and of himself, had nothing to do with the Lord’s gracious calling and promise because Abraham was too busy worshipping false gods. God alone chose. God commanded. God promised.

Well, then, did God make the Promise to Abraham as a reward because Abraham obeyed God’s command to go from his country and kindred? No, the Promise was made first. When we read in Genesis 12:4, “So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him,” God had already made His promise before Abraham did anything. God’s promise had already been delivered fully by God BEFORE Abraham responded faithfully to it. God alone chose Abraham according to His gracious will. God commanded Abraham to go to the land that the Lord would show Him. And then God promised Abraham the blessing of making Abraham into a great nation so that through Abraham, all nations of the

¹ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 2: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 6-14*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 2 (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1999), 246.

earth might receive the Lord's blessing in the Savior of all. It is only at this point that Abraham responded with obedience, however imperfectly. Twice he lied about the fact that Sarah was his wife, saying she was his sister (Gen 12.10-20; 20.1-18). His conduct in regard to Hagar (Sarah's maidservant, whom she gave to Abraham in order to have a son, Ishmael, because they lost trust in the promise) is far from exemplary (Gen 16.4-6).

It is not on the basis of Abraham's faithfulness or righteousness or even his fear of God that the Lord chose him to be the father of many nations and the forefather of the Savior according to the flesh. God chose Abraham by grace and offered the Promise by grace, without any merit or worthiness in Abraham.

Let's take a moment then and take up this question: Is it true that God chose us to be His people because we are always righteous in and of ourselves and because we always fear God? That is also FALSE. By nature, we are the same as our forefather, Abraham. We are idolators. We are unfaithful. We are sinners.

In the *Small Catechism* section "Christian Questions with their Answers," which you can also find on page 329 in the front of the *Lutheran Service Book* hymnal, Pastor Luther prepared these questions for those who intend to go to the Sacrament. These begin, "Do you believe that you are a sinner? *Yes, I believe it. I am a sinner.* How do you know this? *From the Ten Commandments, which I have not kept.* What have you deserved from God because of your sins? *His wrath and displeasure, temporal death, and eternal damnation.*" As Paul wrote in our text, "The payment is not credited as a gift, but according to what is owed." What is owed to the sinner? Wrath, physical death, and eternal damnation! "The wages of sin is death" (Rom 6.23 ESV). That's what we should receive from God—

punishment for our idolatry, unfaithfulness, and lack of love toward our neighbor. We, like Abraham, have no standing of righteousness or faithfulness before God on our own merit.

But did God promise us salvation from our sins if we just do our best and try to be “good people” according to His Law and Commandments? Certainly not! The Law brings wrath because we cannot keep it. Even our best isn’t good enough. “Good” isn’t good enough. Only perfect will do! (Matthew 5:48). The Law doesn’t make us better. Doing the Law in part doesn’t fix the problem. The Law makes us aware of our problem in order to point us to the One who remedies the problem. Those blessed are not those who “just do their best to make God happy.” The blessed are those who have their “lawless deeds forgiven” and “their sins covered over.” The only thing we offer to God is the sin that makes grace necessary.

So, Abraham was credited with righteousness by grace alone through faith alone? Absolutely! Paul quotes Gen 15:6, “And Abraham believed in God, and it was credited to him for righteousness.” Righteousness is credited to Abraham because God *counts* something—righteousness—as belonging to Abraham. This is not something Abraham *does*, but something Abraham simply *receives* through believing. God acts for Abraham in choosing him according to His grace to be the father of many nations. God acts for Abraham according to His Promise, crediting the sinner with righteousness because of the promised Seed, the Messiah, Jesus Christ, who would win forgiveness for Abraham and all his descendants, those of faith. So the apostle writes later in Romans 4, “But the words ‘it was counted to him’ were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be

counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (Rom. 4:23–25 ESV).

Does this mean, then, that the Promise is for us to be received by faith? Yes! Romans 4:16, "On account of this, the promise is from faith, in order that it is according to grace, so that the promise is certain to every seed, not to the one from the Law only, but also to the one who is from the faith of Abraham who is father of all of us."

Jesus Christ purchased and won our forgiveness of sins with His sacrifice on the cross. His blood "covers over" us. The blood of Christ is applied to us in Baptism. Through the Holy Spirit's gift of faith, through God's gracious gift of believing in the Promised One, Jesus, we, who have committed lawless acts and appear to be loaded with sins, do not have our sins counted against us. They are covered in the blood of Christ, atoned for, God's wrath appeased by Jesus' death, salvation won, forgiveness granted, and the righteousness of Christ applied to us. 2 Corinthians 5:19, "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (ESV).

This is God's perspective on us: God *credits* righteousness to ungodly people like you and me who believe in Jesus Christ through the gift of saving faith. Now, believers like us are similarly called to *count* ourselves as dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (Rom 6.11), even though our present experiences often appear to contradict that assertion. Why? Because death to sin and resurrection to new life with Christ is the reality which took place in Baptism. So we read in Romans 6, "How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as

Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. . . . For one who has died has been set free from sin” (Rom. 6:2–4, 7 ESV). Even though we do not deserve it, our debts, our transgressions and sins, have been erased, and Christ’s righteousness has been added to our account. God the Father has declared you righteous by grace through faith in Jesus, your Savior.

And this Promise is certain. The Credit is certain. Forgiveness is certain. If it were dependent upon us, upon our ability to fulfill God’s Word and to keep God’s Law according to His perfect standard, we could never be certain. Our sins and guilt would flood us and we would be overcome. But since the Promise is from faith, we can be most certain that we are credited with the righteousness of Jesus, forgiven of all our sins, and graced with the faith that believes and receives these Gospel gifts. Hear what the Scriptures say to you so that you may be certain:

Is. 61:10 I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness.

Rom. 5:17 For if, because of one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

Rom. 8:10 But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.

1Cor. 1:30 And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption.

Philippians 3:9 [We are found in Christ,] not having a righteousness of [our] own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.

By God's grace, Christ's Righteousness is credited to you. The Promise is certain to you in Christ. God has declared you to be righteous by faith alone, not because of works, according to His grace through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.