



[Pastor Steven Billings](#)

Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent
March 5, 2023

God's Grace and God's Gifts, Given to Us

Romans 4:1–8, 13–17

¹ What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? ² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³ For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” ⁴ Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. ⁵ And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, ⁶ just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: ⁷ “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; ⁸ blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.”

¹³ For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴ For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. ¹⁵ For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression. ¹⁶ That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, ¹⁷ as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

What is grace? Some have defined it – rightly so – as God's undeserved love for His people – undeserved in the sense that we – as sinners – do not in any way merit His love and kindness toward us. But love is who God is. And what does love do? Love gives. And, since God is love, He gives. His grace is a gift for those of every time and place who believe in Him. It was for those in the Old Testament who placed their trust in the long-promised Messiah to come, and it's for those of the New Testament who've placed their trust in the Messiah who has come and will come again.

In today's Old Testament, the Lord called Abram to leave his home country for a land he did not know. He was to pack up everything he owned and move . . . at the age of 75! In our day it's not unheard of for people that age to move to warmer climates or into a retirement community or a nursing home. Such moves, even though they may be well-calculated, can still constitute a major change in a person's life, often affecting that person adversely.

But how might you react if you were instructed to move without being told where? Wouldn't this, at the very least, be a critical turning point in your life? Would you resist it,



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or would you embrace it? Would you be able to accept that such a move would indeed be in your best interest? Questions such as these surely must have been in the mind of Abram as the Lord called this old man to uproot his entire family and travel with them to a foreign land without even knowing where it was.

However, to accompany them, God had given, as a traveling companion, the promise that He would make Abram a great nation, and in him all the families of the earth would be blessed. And here's the truly amazing part: Abram didn't question God; he moved his family to the land of Canaan, trusting in God. And God counted this trust as righteousness.

God considered Abram righteous and changed his name to Abraham, for he would become the father of many nations. On account of his faith, he was the blessed recipient of the promise. What Abraham received was the Gospel. The Gospel is full of promises and blessings. Such promises do not come from the Law; the Law brings only threats and curses. As the Apostle Paul writes in today's Epistle: "For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression. That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all" (vv. 13-16). Those who believe the promise are the true children of Abraham, and, therefore recipients of God's grace; those who do not, those who reject the promise, are not under grace, but under the curse of the Law which, instead of blessing us, exposes our sin.

On this Second Sunday in Lent, it's imperative that we examine what this means for us. We begin by asking what sin really is. Many in our day reject the very notion of sin. They either deny any accountability to a higher authority, which is a repudiation of the Law, or they believe that God – if there is such a thing – wouldn't be so mean as to punish anyone for anything, which is an abuse of the Gospel.

But this is a church and we are a people who believe and subscribe to the Word of God. We believe that God is the one who gets to define sin. According to God's holy Word, then, what is sin?

Simply put: Sin is acting contrary to God's will; it's doing what God forbids or not doing what He commands. And you know what? We're all guilty. God has given us the Ten Commandments and we transgress them every day. Even if we violated only the least of the Commandments, the tiniest little Commandment – if you could actually categorize them that way – we would still be guilty of violating them all. Scripture says: "Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. For he who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' also said, 'Do not murder.' If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law" (Jam. 2:10-11).

To do this, to commit sin, is to set ourselves outside the grace of God. It's a



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rejection of the gifts our Lord offers in His Means of Grace. Sin, at its core, is not wanting, not desiring, not craving the gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation that Christ won for us on the cross and now gives us in His Word and Sacraments. And it's not just a rejection of the gifts, but also of the Giver of the gifts – God Himself. Sin is acting contrary to the faith which the Holy Spirit seeks to work in us and acting instead out of our natural hatred of God. It's questioning God's Word and will for us. Sin is not trusting in God's promises.

Of course, trusting God's promises is easier said than done. Not even Abraham trusted God's promises all the time. Impatient from waiting for God's promise of an heir – and at his wife's insistence – he had sexual relations with her servant, thinking, I guess, that God needed their help in fulfilling the promise. When we act contrary to God's commands, often it's because we don't trust Him to meet our needs, and therefore we take matters into our own hands. This is sin, beloved, and the result of sin is death, as Paul writes later in Romans 6, "For the wages of sin is death" (6:23a). Dear family, we must repent.

But it is against our nature to repent. Our natural instinct is to justify our behavior, to make excuses as to why we should be allowed to act the way we do. Repentance is not part of our sinful nature. So our nature has to be changed; we have to become new creatures. In other words, we have to be born again.

Here's the good news: This rebirth has already begun, thanks be to God. It began right there [pointing to baptismal font]. Our rebirth is wrought by water and the Spirit, as our Lord tells us in today's Gospel. As the water was applied with the Word of God upon your head – whether at this font or another one elsewhere – the Holy Spirit entered your heart and began to work in you saving faith in Jesus as your Lord and Savior. This faith is a gift from God, which comes to you by His grace. It brings you to and keeps you in this faith, as He calls you by the Gospel, enlightens you with His gifts, sanctifies and keeps you in the true faith. Since God has given you the faith to believe in His Son, He also gives you the promise that He forgives the sins of all who come to Him in repentance and faith, forgiving us for the sake of His only-begotten Son, who died for our forgiveness and rose again for our justification.

As Moses lifted up the bronze serpent on the pole, God the Father lifted up His Son on the cross, and Christ lifts you up through the forgiveness of sins that He won on the cross and gives you in Baptism, in His Word, and in His precious body and blood. Through these Means, your Lord lifts you up and gives you His gifts, strengthening your faith so that you may look forward to the Last Day, when His promises will be brought to their completion. On that Day you will be translated from this sin-filled world into His Kingdom of Glory for all eternity. As Paul also says in Romans 6, "The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (6:23b).

You are the blessed recipients of God's gifts, beloved, for they are yours by grace – His undeserved love for you – which He gives out of His fatherly, divine goodness and mercy. As the Apostle John writes: "In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that



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God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him" (1 Jn. 4:9-10, 15-16). Abide in Him, dear friend, believe in Him, trust in Him, for He loves you and has given you His gifts of forgiveness, salvation, and everlasting life. Glory be to God! In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen