

Hope. It's hard to understate how important that word is in our culture. I think I first noticed it in 2008. When it was plastered across a million red, white, and blue posters during President Obama's presidential campaign. But it shows up other places as well. The plot of virtually every Star Wars movie has the "power of hope" as its central message. And it has shown up in the speeches of countless major world figures.

Hope drives us. Hope inspires us. Hope convinces us that there's something worth living for. That tomorrow might just be better than yesterday. That there's a purpose to everything we do in life. And it's easy to believe that the memory of one inspirational movie, one powerful quote, one memorable poster, is all it takes to give us the strength to live another day.

It's easy to think that. It's harder to live it out. Because memories are a fickle thing. And hope can be fleeting in the midst of hardship and defeat. And we see evidence of that time and time again in the Old Testament. We read in our Old Testament lesson today,

*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."*

However this appears on the surface, we know that this had to have been a stirring speech that God gave to Abram. It must have been simply because... Abram went. Without hesitation. He left his home. His family. His business. His country. Everything. To travel almost a thousand miles.

To where? God never tells him. It's just, *"to the land that I will show you."* Don't worry. We'll get there. You'll know it when you see it. But Abram goes. He pulls up roots. Packs up his family. Gathers his flocks. And just starts walking. It was a tremendous leap of faith. An incredible act of hope.

But over time, it gets harder and harder to trust God. The memory begins to fade. The hope begins to falter. God had promised to make Abram a great nation. With a great name that would bless all the peoples of the earth.

But he has no son. No heir. No offspring of any kind. One hundred years old and a distant cousin is the one who will inherit his property. But God insists to him, "No. Your son will be your heir. Your flesh and blood. Your descendant will found a great nation." And Abram clings to this promise. He really does. The Bible tells us that Abram believed the Lord.

But it's obvious that doubt begins to creep into his mind. He thinks at one point, "Well, God said I would have a son. He didn't say anything about my wife having a son. So maybe I should have a child with someone else?" No, no... bad idea Abram. God doesn't contradict Himself. If He said you're going to have a son, He meant you and your wife. Not some concubine.

But finally, God does work a miracle and Isaac is born. But where's this great nation? Isaac is one small boy. Well, Abraham would never see that great nation. Nor would Isaac. Or Jacob. Or anyone, really, until the time of Moses. And even then, they're not a nation. They're a mob. An uncivilized nomadic hoard. It's not for hundreds of years that Israel learns what it means to be a nation.

And even then, God's words aren't really fulfilled. Because, where's this blessing to the whole world? Israel sometimes seems like the center of the universe when you read the Old Testament. So it's easy to forget that there are plenty of people all over the planet living and dying every day during this time who have never even heard of a place called Israel. How can all peoples on earth be blessed through Abram, if they've never even heard of him?

No, the truth is, the Lord's prophecy to Abram isn't fulfilled in his lifetime, or his son's lifetime, or Moses' lifetime, or David's lifetime. It's not until Jesus Christ is crucified on Calvary's cross, dies, and rises again that this prophecy to Abram is completely fulfilled. Literally, thousands of years, the people of God are left with nothing but hope and a memory to get them through hardship and defeat. Until finally, God's Word is fulfilled.

It's a tough road to follow. But Abram followed it, not out of obedience, but out of faith. That's what Paul tells us in our Epistle lesson. If Abram had gone to the promised land out of a sense of obligation, out of obedience because God had demanded it, it wouldn't have been a righteous act.

It would have been a work of the Law. That's how the Law works. You see that everyday. When you drive down the street and pass a cop, do you expect to be rewarded for going the speed limit? When you walk into a store and pay for your items at the cash register, do you expect some prize because you didn't shoplift them?

Of course not. Our civil laws exist to punish us when we disobey. But there is no reward for obedience. So it is with God's Law. *"To the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due"*

However, *"to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness"* In other words, if you act out of faith, your faith will be rewarded. If you act out of hope, your hope will not be in vain.

God told Abram, "Go and I'll make you a great nation." And Abram went. Not because he had to and not because he would receive some immediate reward for doing so. But because he believed that it would be worth it in the end to hope in the Lord.

And that faith, that hope, was credited to him as righteousness. God looked at him and said, "That's what it means to be my child. Anybody can be obedient to a God of power and wrath and judgement. But not everybody can believe that a God of power and wrath and judgement can also be a God of love and grace and hope."

Not everybody can believe that. In fact, no one can believe that. Not on their own. It is the act of a God of love and grace and hope that enables us to see past the Law, see past our obligation and our obedience, to see past our own sinful doubt and disobedience, to see the Gospel. The Good News that God always fulfills His promises. And has fulfilled his promise in Jesus Christ.

God promised to make Abram a great nation. He promised to bless all the world through him. Abram never saw that promise fulfilled. But we did. And we do everyday. In that Good News, we have our own moment of hope, like Abram did. Because almost the same words were spoken to us as were spoken to him.

In John 20, the very day Jesus rose from the dead, he came to His disciples and He said to them, *"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."* And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, *"Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."*

I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse. I will forgive those whom you forgive and withhold forgiveness from those you do not forgive. Receive the Holy Spirit. And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

Like Abram, we wait with faith and hope. Abram waited with faith that God would one day fulfill His promises and hope that they were promises worth waiting for. We wait with faith God has already fulfilled His promises and hope that there are promises yet to be fulfilled that are even greater than the ones that have already come.

And so we remember Abram not as a man who did some great thing and was rewarded for it. But as a man who heard God's promise that he would be rewarded and believed that it was true. Abram believed that he would be rewarded even though he had done nothing at all to earn that reward, but solely out of God's grace and mercy.

We remember Abram's calling and we take hope from it. For we are travelers like him. Journeying towards a destination we have never seen. A destination that is as distant and unknown as the land of Canaan was for him. And yet, a destination to which God has called us by faith.

It's a destination called the resurrection. And just as surely as our Lord traveled there Himself, so He will lead us to the Promised Land. Amen.