

## God's Word and Human will

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after the Feast of the Holy Trinity

Genesis 12:1 – 4



### *The Call of Abram*

*1 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. 2 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. 3 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." 4 So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.*

When we discuss biblical texts together, often a text may be difficult to understand. Perhaps because the text is very old and speaks of a world we don't understand. Or maybe we see a contradiction in the text. Today's sermon text, however, is not a difficult text. Today's text is very simple. There are no complicated sentences, no foreign words, no rituals or customs that need to be understood or explained. It's all very simple: God calls Abraham... Abraham goes... God blesses Abraham... Abraham is to be a blessing. So, I could end today's sermon with that. There's nothing more to explain here. It's all crystal clear.

No, unfortunately we can't make it that easy for ourselves. We can't make it that easy for ourselves because God's Word to us today contradicts everything that human reason considers good and right. Abraham and his wife Sarah were already 75 years old when God's Word came to him. He was to receive a blessing and be a blessing to the whole world. But Abraham couldn't find this all out for himself. He was simply supposed to set off into the unknown. The only thing he could take with him was the Word of God in his heart. This Word contradicted all common sense. At 75, he and his barren wife Sarah were to become the start of a whole new nation. Yet God gave no proof of the success or efficacy of His promise. Abraham had to wait many more years for his first child, Isaac, and even then it was by no means clear how and in what way God's blessing with Isaac would become as great as the heavens.

Dear congregation, Abraham is our father in faith. This doesn't mean that we should all just go wander into a foreign land. But it does mean that, like Abraham, we must take steps into the unknown. Dear congregation, we have a simple text before us today. And yet, this text is difficult because it is so simple. It tells us, in as simple language as possible, what an imposition faith actually is on our understanding. That is precisely what is so difficult about the Christian message. We want to go in one direction, but God's Word sends us in the opposite direction and wants something different than what we want. And when God's Word is spoken to us, we either reject it or to submit to it with our will and understanding. The Bible describes this with the word "metanoia." That means repentance, literally to turn around or have a change of heart. So, God's Word expects us to take a completely new path than before. Repent and turn around! And that is difficult. That is precisely why people always want to make the harshness of God's Word easier to digest. In this effort to make God's Word easier, God's Word is bent toward the dictates of society or according to one's own will.

This is why the Church appears to have nothing at all to say to society, always lagging a few years behind and mimicking the Zeitgeist like a monkey. When we do that, we minimize the scandal of the biblical message and are in danger of rendering the entire biblical message irrelevant. Then the Church has also failed in its task of bringing God's Word to mankind. With no Word to bring, it will also not be understood. God's Word does not want to adapt to us, it wants to challenge us and change our will. God's Word wants to question us to our very core. Abraham had to completely change the path he had taken up to that point and take a different path. We must leave the path dictated by our human reason, our sinful flesh, and the world to find another way. In other words, turn around. And that is not easy. We see this kind of thing repeatedly. We see it with the God's people in both the Old and New Testaments. Time and again we hear a groan from the mouths of God's people. "That is a hard saying," (John 6:60 ESV) say Jesus' disciples. The saying is hard not because it is foreign or incomprehensible, but precisely because it is quite clear and shows us in the deepest sense what must change in us. God's Word doesn't beat around the bush. Jesus also always spoke his Word precisely and clearly into the situation. His Word was especially clear when it confronted people's current situations. Just as he addressed the blind man's situation so that he could see, and the lame man so that he could walk, so Jesus addresses the rich man concerning his wealth and the sinner concerning his guilt. It is a hard saying not

because it is not understood, but precisely because it is understood and because it contradicts the current situation. The Bible tells those who cling desperately to the happiness they can experience here on earth that they are on the wrong track, that the happiness they experience will come to an end. God addresses the other, who has lost all happiness and no longer has any hope, about his hopelessness and wants to show him that he has a future in God's hands. We can see what this means in the parable of the great feast. There we encounter two groups of people. Those invited first decline because they are on the sunny side of life. One has bought land; the other has married. They have all acquired a foundation for the future. What they cannot see is that their investment is built on shaky ground. They have no future, and their plans have a short shelf life. But because they are relying on this false ground, they fail to understand the invitation to God's feast. The other group of people is quite different. In contrast to the first group, they have little to look forward to. They now realize the incredible fact that they do have a future. God's Word addresses the experience of both groups of people. Some say they have a future, and God shows them that they have no future on the path they have chosen. The other group sees no future in their own lives at all, and God counters this hopelessness and shows that there is a future after all. This is what Abraham experienced and what all of Abraham's children experience to this day. Faith in Christ flies in the face of personal experience.

And when we are gathered here, we have come together not to spend an hour saying something nice to each other and to be confirmed in the path we have chosen, but because we place ourselves in God's hands and under His will. No pharmacist or doctor can tell us what risks and side effects this Word carries with it. It may be that our eyes are opened, and we suddenly recognize the things upon which we have built our entire lives as false and a mistake. It may also be that the prayer "Thy will be done," which we say so often in the Lord's Prayer, suddenly reveals its full meaning, and we groan bitterly because we see that we neither want to equate our will with God's will nor do we actually do so! We can see this stumbling block repeatedly in our own personal lives. How often do our plans differ from the plans of our God? It is different for everyone. And sooner or later, this happens to all of us. We lose our job, we get sick, we lose a good friend. Such situations are deeply hurtful and fundamentally challenge us. Can we follow the path given to us by God, just like that? Abraham does. Why? He does this for one reason: God's Word has a future. Abraham can see almost nothing of God's plan. He only recognizes God's Word to him. He knows that God's Word remains firm and certain for eternity. Unlike his own personal fate at the age of 75, God remains firm and certain for eternity. And this God takes us with Him into His future. That alone allows Abraham to take his first steps into the unknown. He doesn't have a plan. He only knows that God has a plan, and that's enough. God still speaks his Word to us today. He challenges us to recognize the path we have chosen as wrong and to recognize God's path and his future as the foundation of our lives. What keeps us clinging to God, however, is not experience, but, just as it was with Abraham, his Word. That is why we in the Church want to build so relentlessly on God's Word. There is no worship service without God's Word. Even when it contradicts our experiences. There is no sacrament without God's Word, which shows us what we can receive there. Where God does not speak through his Word, He is not present. Our faith comes from this Word, however scandalous it may be. We see that with Abraham. We see it with the disciples, who are challenged by Jesus to cast their nets again, even though they hadn't caught anything all night and one doesn't fish during the day. We see that every Sunday when we are together here. Contrary to every experience, we approach the week with his Word. We want to influence society and build the Church on His Word alone. Oh, how little faith we often have, especially in building the Kingdom of God! How often we rely only on our experiences and not at all on His Word. There are always a thousand and one arguments as to why we cannot build a church in this or that way and cannot be missional. And how rare it has become that we simply listen to God and believe despite our experience. Just consider what would have happened if the Apostle Paul had stayed in Damascus for 30 years after his conversion, or even in the desert near Damascus. From there, he would surely have had enough reasons not to travel the world and proclaim the Gospel. It's too dangerous, too expensive, too tedious, too stressful... he would surely have been able to back up these reasons with good, plausible arguments. If he had done that, we wouldn't be here today. There would be no Church and no future.

Dear congregation, dear fellow Christians, there are many signposts on my path and yours where God wants to show us the way. Sometimes there's a signpost in the middle of our path that says: Turn around! Sometimes God wants us to turn and take a different path. If that's the case, we know that there will be 1,001 reasons why God's path is the wrong one. But we should put all these reasons aside for a moment and ask which path is based on God's future and His eternity, and which is based on our prosperity Christianity.

God walks a path with us. The path is difficult, that's clear. But it has a future. Amen.