

Lent 2 Sermon
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From the time that we are children, we hear stories about how people get what they deserve—that if someone has good things happening in their life, that it is because they worked hard and are a good person. We're told that Santa Claus is watching us throughout the year to see if we are good or bad—and that good kids get presents from Santa while bad kids get coal. We're told children's stories that reinforce this, like how the puppet Pinocchio's nose grows when he lies, which causes him all sorts of problems, and how he doesn't become a real boy until he learns to be truthful. We're told that the kind and hardworking Cinderella becomes a princess, while her wicked and lazy stepfamily gets nothing. The moral of most children's stories are that if you are good, good things will come into your life and if you are bad, you'll receive bad in turn.

Many Christians view our faith in much the same way. Many believe that if you are good you will be rewarded by God in this life, and if you are bad, God will punish you in this life. In the Pentecostal church that I grew up in, if someone lost a job or became ill, people would whisper behind that person's back, speculating as to what that person had done wrong in order to deserve God's wrath. And there are people like Kenneth Copeland, who preach that our good deeds will be rewarded by God with good things, most often cold hard cash. And though there are some stories in scripture which seem to support this idea, the overarching Christian message in the bible tells a different story.

In the Old Testament reading for today, God commands a man named Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." By the time that Abram, who would become Abraham, was given this command by God, he was 75 years old, and probably not looking to up and move everything he owned at that stage in his life. But he obeyed God, he "went, as the Lord had told him." And thus Abraham became the inheritor of God's covenant, God's promise to bless and be with Abraham and his descendants forever. But Abraham didn't become the inheritor of this promise through his own actions. He didn't do anything to *deserve* this promise. In many ways, Abraham was a flawed person, just like each of us. We can see this later in his story when he lies about his wife Sarah being his sister (twice) in order to protect his own safety, which not only twice brought bad luck upon those who coveted Sarah, but also put her in some very compromising and inappropriate situations. No, Abraham did not become the inheritor of God's promise because he was such a good person or because he worked hard to earn it. So why did God choose him? Why did such a flawed, undeserving individual become the forefather of our faith?

In Paul's letter to the Romans, he explains why God made this covenant with Abraham in spite of his flaws. Paul reminds us that in Genesis we are told that, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Paul goes on to say, "to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift, but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness." Paul is using accounting principles to explain why Abraham was able to inherit God's promise. If Abraham had done nothing but good in his life, if he had done good works, then would deserve to be "paid" for his work—he would in some ways deserve to be rewarded by God. However, Paul also confronts us with the truth that even though some of us do good in our lives, we also all do bad things, we also all sin. And this sin negates any reward we may think we are due for our good behavior.

So how are we rewarded, how are we given our wages, as Paul would say, by God? By believing, through our faith. "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteous." Though we are sinful and undeserving, putting our spiritual accounts in the negative, through our faith God reckons us as righteous, filling up our negative accounts and giving us more than what we have earned. But this accounting is not settled in our earthly lives. Our faith is not a simple rewards and punishment system, like a child trying to earn gifts from Santa Claus or Pinocchio trying to become a real boy. Because for a

Christian, our true rewards are not seen in this life, but in the life to come.

This is what Christ attempts to explain to the Pharisee Nicodemus in the Gospel reading. Jesus tells him, “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Jesus is teaching Nicodemus that if one wishes to see the kingdom of God, then they must have faith, and have faith in things heavenly, not just worldly things. If we focus only on the rewards and punishments of this life and mistakenly believe we get what we are due, we fall short, because, as Jesus tells Nicodemus “If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?”

Yet we must remember that even when considering the heavenly things which we look forward to in the next life, God does not reward or condemn as if God was Santa Claus, rewarding the good and punishing the bad. The Christian message is not one of condemnation, but of salvation. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” Yes, Christ came into this world not to save those who were worthy of being saved, but to save the whole world—despite the world being undeserving.

And it is this example that we are to follow in our own lives. In Lent especially we contemplate the fact that we are given the gift of everlasting life by God through our faith, although we are undeserving. And we consider how we might better model our lives to live out this truth. When God made the covenant with Abraham, God told Abraham “I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.” God blessed Abraham NOT because Abraham had done good and refrained from evil, not because Abraham was DESERVING of blessing, but so he might bless others in turn. In this we see how we are to live our lives—how we are to view our earthly blessings in light of the heavenly promises in which we believe. If we have been blessed by God, we are not meant to see this as a sign that we are somehow more deserving or more righteous—that we did something to earn our blessings. We are to view our blessings as a reminder of the heavenly blessings we will receive in the life to come—the promise of eternal life given to us, though we are undeserving. If we believe in these promises, and remember this gift which Christ has earned for us, then our earthly blessings serve as an opportunity to bless others in this life, as God would have us do.

No when we are blessed by God, we cannot boast. Our faith is not a simple kids story like Pinocchio or Cinderella. Because it is not by our works that we gain justification, but by our faith and God’s mercy and grace. The gift of eternal life that we have been given is so much more valuable than we could ever earn through good works. And just as the blessings of the world to come are given to us, even though we are undeserving, so we cannot claim to have earned all of the blessings of this world. Yet just because we do not earn our blessings, we’re not supposed to respond to our being blessed with self-loathing—by feeling guilty because we do not deserve what we receive. We are to recognize that we are not deserving so that we respond to being blessed, both with earthly and heavenly things, with gratefulness towards God and therefore a renewed desire to do God’s work in the world, to bless others as we have been blessed. Let the blessings of this life remind us of the blessings we are to receive in the life to come, and inspire us to become a blessing to others in turn, in the name of Christ. Amen.