

Genesis 12:1-9

It's really too bad that Abraham did not have a written will. It would have spared countless lives. For well over one hundred years Jews and Arabs were fighting over who was the rightful owner of the land of Israel. Like two sons quarrelling over who receives Dad's estate, Jews and Arabs both claimed that the land was theirs. It goes back to the verse in our text: "*To your offspring (your seed),*" God told Abram, "*I will give this land.*" Isaac was the promised son of Abraham, and so the Jews claimed possession because they are the descendants of Isaac. But the Arabs, who are descended from Ishmael, claimed that because he is the eldest son of Abraham, the land was theirs.

Yet it does not take a Bible scholar to figure this one out. Just reading through the first five books we see God repeating His promise not to the children of Ishmael, but to the children of Isaac. And after Moses led Isaac's descendants to the brink of the Promised Land, God reminded them of what He had told Abraham--that the land stretched out before them was theirs. Case settled. Where's Judge Judy when you need her?

Now you may not really care who the land belongs to because you do not have a horse in this race...as long as the Israelis and Muslims are not actively fighting when you want to go and visit the Holy Land. But reading the Apostle Paul in Romans 9-11 and Galatians 3, we learn that we also are descendants of Abraham, not by blood, but by faith in Christ, and that the Seed to which the land was given was referring to Jesus. I'm not suggesting that you go to Israel and stake out a homestead for yourself there. You would have a fight on your hands. But nonetheless, we who are baptized into Christ are the true children of Abraham and his rightful heirs.

Now when God promised the land of Canaan, or Israel, to Abraham's descendants, notice that Abraham, himself, was not included. He never owned land there. He lived in tents and moved around the land of Canaan from place to place. The land was promised to those who would come after him...four and five hundred years after him. When the Children of Israel were traveling through the desert to the Promised Land, they were heading to a place they had never seen, never stepped foot on, having no deed, no property title, just the promise from God that the land was theirs.

There is a beautiful parallel here for us. We are heading to our Promised Land of Canaan. We, too, have never seen it. We have never stepped foot there. We have no deed, no property title. All we have is God's promise that the land is ours, not by right, but by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Now because Isaac's descendants, the Children of Israel, had never seen the land of promise, they struggled on their journey. They quarreled with each other, with the man who was leading them and speaking God's words to them; they struggled with God. Don't we do the same thing? We've never seen the land of heaven and so we struggle on our journey. We have doubts about heaven and about God. "Maybe the world is right," we're tempted to believe. "Maybe we should just live for the present. Make the most of this world and forget about life after death. After all, non-believers seem happy and well-adjusted. Maybe they know more about life than we think they do." As Abraham's children struggled in the wilderness, so we struggle in the wilderness of this life. We're tempted, and we fall so easily. We get upset. Big things bother us. Little things bother us. We worry. We have angry exchanges with our neighbors, with our family, with those in our church family. Because you and I do not walk by sight, but by faith, it is so easy to take our eyes off our goal. We become so caught up in the things of this world that making money becomes more important than receiving God's gifts in worship. Finishing our household chores becomes more important than spending time in the Scriptures and Catechism. Relaxing in front of the TV takes priority over attending any Lenten

or Holy Week service. This is what happened to Lot, Abraham's nephew. He became engrossed in the world, choosing to settle in the land near Sodom, and it ruined his life and nearly brought him down into hell.

Living in this world is a dangerous business. We're no match for it, for its temptations, for the power of the devil, for the sin that lives in us. We need some good news. We need to be strengthened on our journey. We need forgiveness for our sins of weakness, and we need God's assurance and His promise to lead us to our goal. We need all this because we struggle with Him most of all. Our struggles with our family, with our pastor and church members, with our antagonistic neighbor are really struggles with God. I know what's in your heart because it's in mine as well. We see our sins against God. We see how often we fail Him. We do not want to put Him and His gifts last on our priority list, but we are weak. We fall so easily. How long will He put up with us? Heaven is our goal, but you know, as well as I, that we do not deserve it. Will God tire of leading us there because we are such sinful people?

Look again at God's promise to Abraham: *"To your offspring I will give this land."* Abraham had no child yet when these words were spoken. The descendants of Isaac were given this land long before they were born. Did God give them the land because they deserved it, because they obeyed Him so well, because He was the top priority in their lives? Absolutely not! The promise was given long before they were even conceived in their mother's wombs. God made His covenant with Abraham. It was Abraham's faith, God's gifts to Abraham that became a blessing to his descendants.

It's the same with us. God does not promise you the land of heaven because you obey Him so well, because you strive to keep His Law, because you have your priorities straight. It's for the sake of your Abraham--Jesus Christ, that the promised land is yours. You did nothing to cause God to give you such a promise. You weren't even around yet when the promise was given. You did not bring yourself to Holy Baptism where you were given the deed to heaven. God brought you. You do not bring yourself to church to receive His gifts through Word and through Sacrament. It's God who draws you here to keep you in the Christian Faith. It's because of Jesus' faithfulness that you are blessed. It's because Jesus had His priorities straight that God deals favorably with you. The land of heaven belongs, not to you, as if you and I earn a place there, but to Jesus. He earned its magnificence and its glory. He is the Offspring, the Seed to which the promised land is given. But He, out of mercy, gives it to you. That's why He was baptized for you, and why He suffered for you, and died for you, and rose again for you.

You are Jesus' children, and He has written down His will. *"Take eat,"* He says, *"My body given for you...Take drink, My blood shed for you for the remission of sins."* His last will and testament is before you on the altar. Do you have doubts about His love for you? Here is His will and testament declaring, proving His love for you. Do you struggle in your journey? Here in His will and testament is His promise to walk with you. Do you struggle in your faith, doubting the outcome, the goal, of your journey because your sins are always before you? Here in His will and testament are words of assurance for you: *"Take eat...Take drink...for the forgiveness of your sins."* Your God does not make empty promises to you. He confirms His promises and seals them with the blood of Christ. If this was merely wine in the cup, you would have reason to doubt. But it's not. *"This is My blood,"* says Jesus to you. Come, therefore, with all your sins and be strengthened, be comforted, be forgiven.

My fellow sinners, God forgives you not because you have your priorities straight, not because you are doing so well on your journey. He forgives you because He has a merciful heart, because He loves to be gracious to sinners, because Jesus died for you my friend. This does not mean that your life will

be wonderful this week, that your troubles will vanish, that your journey to heaven will be like a walk through a garden. Life is full of troubles. But it does mean that no trouble can keep you from reaching your goal. No sin of yours is too great for God to forgive. You have God's promise. You have Jesus' last will and testament. It's not that the land of heaven can be yours...it is yours now in Jesus Christ. Amen.