

Heirs According to the Promise

Scripture: Galatians 3:26-29

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Morning Service**

People of God: In some homes, especially in the homes of grandparents, you may be able to find a family tree. A family tree shows how all the family members are related to each other. Some of these family trees can become fairly extensive. A friend of mine has done a lot of research into his family tree, going back many generations. In the year before I went to seminary we went to the Netherlands together. One day he spent the entire time in the library of Zwolle digging deep into his past, while I explored the rest of the town.

One of the more famous family trees is that of Alex Haley. He wrote about his family tree in his book *Roots*. *Roots* tells the story of how one of his ancestors was captured in Africa to become a slave in the American South, and what happened after that. When the book became a movie, it was one of the most viewed miniseries on TV.

Family trees tell us a story. They tell us who we are and how we came to be here. *Roots* told the story of survival through slavery in a strange land. My family tree tells the story of immigration and family growth. Your family tree tells your own particular story.

In our Scripture reading for this morning the apostle Paul deals with an issue concerning a family tree. He is dealing with the question of who belongs to the family tree of Abraham and why they belong. Our text is the conclusion of whole matter: *If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.*

At first glance, we might not see what is so important about this. Does it matter who belongs to the family tree of Abraham? Isn't Abraham this old guy who lived a long time ago traveling from place to place? Why should I be concerned about whether I am part of his family tree? What difference

does it make? How does this relate to the baptism we have witnessed this morning?

It makes an important difference because of who Abraham is and what God promised him. The book of Genesis tells us the story of Abraham. Out of all the people living at that time, God chose Abraham to restart his plan of salvation. Through Abraham God began to create a people, who would serve and worship the Lord. God promised Abraham many things, including that through him all the nations of the world would be blessed. Through Abraham the Messiah would come. Through Abraham the plan of salvation would be achieved.

Wouldn't we want to be part of this family tree? To be linked with Abraham means to be part of God's plan of salvation. It means to be part of God's chosen people. That's something good, isn't it? To be part of Abraham's family tree also means that we receive the benefits of the promises that God gave to Abraham. Paul writes: *If you are Abraham's seed, you are also heirs according to the promise.* We'll get to what this inheritance all includes shortly, but it should be enough to peak our interest. As a result, it is important whether or not we belong to the family tree of Abraham.

But who can claim Abraham as their forefather? But what right can we claim to receive the promises given to him? Paul argues in verse seven that those who believe in Jesus are the children of Abraham.

In stating this Paul is going against the traditional view of the Jews. The Jews, of course, prided themselves as being the descendants of Abraham. They after all are the biological children of Abraham. Now usually you trace a family tree according to the biological roots. But we are dealing with no ordinary family tree. Paul argues that those who believe in Jesus are the children of Abraham. Biology has nothing to do with it. It's a question of faith. If you believe in Jesus, then you belong to the family tree of Abraham.

We're dealing here, not with a biological family, but a spiritual family. It is by faith in Jesus that we become members of Abraham's family and therefore part of God's family. Abraham himself is the model of being saved by faith. Verse six states: *He believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.* When God called Abraham to leave behind the city of Ur to wander in a land that would not belong to his family for nearly five hundred years, Abraham believed in God. He acted in faith.

It is faith that makes us part of the family of Abraham. Faith in Christ. Jesus Christ is one in whom we must place our trust and confidence. Because it is in Christ that the promises given to Abraham are fulfilled. And

so Paul concludes in verse 29: *If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed.* Christians are the true children of Abraham. Not by biological birth; but by faith in Christ.

That also means we have an inheritance waiting for us. Verse 29 adds: *If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.* When you are part of a family, you might inherit things that your parents or grandparents want you to have. When my friend began to research his family tree in the Netherlands he jokingly said: Maybe I'll find a distant relative who is rich. If I become friends with him, he might include me in his will so that I will inherit some of his wealth.

When we belong to the family of Abraham we are heirs according to the promise. There is an inheritance that we have because we belong to this family that started with Abraham. Paul expresses this by using the phrase "sons of God." Paul says in 3:26 *You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus* and then in 4:7 *So you are no longer a slave but a son; since you are a son, God has made you an heir.*

This language of inheritance must be properly understood. Otherwise, it won't make sense. Why should everyone be called a son? Calissa is a girl, yet through baptism she too can receive this inheritance. Yet she is here called then a "son." Shouldn't we say we are all sons and daughters of God? In other contexts that might be okay, but not here. Because here the term "son" is a technical term. It is not referring to any child; nor to just any son. It is referring to the first born son--the one who is heir to the inheritance.

It was the custom in biblical times for the first born son to receive the bulk of the inheritance. That meant he had an advantage over the rest of his siblings. As a result, it was a great privilege to be the first-born son. So when we read here that you are a son who is an heir that means that God considers everyone who believes in Christ to be first-born sons. We all--male or female, slave or free, Jewish or Gentile Christian--we all are considered first-born sons and therefore are heirs of the full inheritance.

That leads us to the question: What is this inheritance that we are heirs to? The text does not give the details. It just says: according to the promise. What are these promises, first given to Abraham?

In a nutshell, it is the promise of the covenant. Covenant is one of these words that we often use but don't often explain. But covenant describes the relationship between God and his people. In this relationship God gives this promise: I will be your God and you will be my people. You will find this promise repeated throughout the Bible. It is the most basic promise we have inherited. Its the promise that God who is eternal, that God who is the Creator of all things, that God who is holy and awesome--this

God can be MY God. I can be counted among his chosen people. That's the fundamental promise given to Abraham. Now through faith in Jesus we are heirs of that promise. We can claim it as our own. We can call the Creator our heavenly Father.

But this promise first given to Abraham also includes the promise of the promised land. That was very important in the OT. God's people were given the promised land, the land flowing with milk and honey. What happens to this promise? Do we just forget about it?

What we need to realize is that the promised land of Canaan--that tiny piece of real estate between the Jordan river and the Mediterranean Sea--was just the beginning of the fulfillment of God's promise. Just as in Christ the true descendants of Abraham were extended to include people from all the nations of the world, so too the promise of land has been extended to cover not just one piece of territory but the whole earth. We have been promised the whole world as our inheritance. Remember one of the beatitudes: Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth. In other words, we are promised a renewed creation, in which this world is cleansed of sin and its effects. That is the inheritance that awaits us.

Isn't this a great inheritance? To be part of the family of God. To receive everlasting life in a perfect creation. Those are the promises to those who belong to the family tree of Abraham. This promised inheritance is symbolized by the sacrament of baptism. Verse 27 mentions baptism. *All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.*

Baptism is a sign and seal of our union with Christ. You can say that it is a sign that we are part of the family tree of Abraham. An earlier sign was given to Abraham. It was the sign of circumcision. Through the use of that sign the people of Israel could identify themselves as separate from the world and dedicated to God. The sign of circumcision has now been replaced with the sign of baptism. It is the mark that tells us we belong to God's people.

This morning Calissa have received that sign. It is an indication that she too belongs to the covenant people of God. She too belongs to the family tree of Abraham, and with it the promised inheritance.

But unlike the first sign of circumcision, baptism does not leave a permanent mark to remind a child of this event. As a result, Kimberly and Greg have the duty to teach Calissa about what happened this day. Encourage her with the promises of God. Remind her of the inheritance she can have from God--an inheritance far greater than anything you can give her.

Baptism acts as a guarantee of this inheritance. Just as an inheritance

today is guaranteed by a will, signed by lawyers so baptism is God's guarantee that if you belong to Christ, you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise. God will do what he has promised.

But that means baptism is also a call to respond in faith, to believe in Jesus. Calissa needs to claim the promises given to her in their baptism. In faith she is to accept Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior.

Now to those who received this sign of baptism, I ask you this morning: what are you doing with this promised inheritance? Are you ignoring it? Are you living your life as if God has not made this claim upon you? Are you living as children of Abraham--trying to be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ? Or are you squandering your inheritance--wasting away what God has given you? The promises of God--of being his child, of being heirs of the new creation--might seem remote, might seem less fun than what the world might offer, but in the long run, it is the only thing that will satisfy.

Don't ignore your inheritance. Don't squander it. Instead, build upon it. Live as a faithful child of God. Go through life, with its joys and sorrows, with the confidence and the comfort of the promised new creation.

What a privilege it is to be part of God's family. What an awesome inheritance that awaits us. Amen.