

I.N.I.

Epiphany Sunday
Jan. 4, 2015
Genesis 12:1-4

In Christ Jesus, who was manifested before the whole world, both Old Testament Jew and New Testament Gentile, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

If you listened closely to the opening words that were just spoken you might have wondered how they could be true: "In Christ Jesus, who was manifested before the whole world, both Old Testament Jew and New Testament Gentile." How was Jesus manifested before the Old Testament Jewish person?

Today is the day we are celebrating Epiphany. The date chosen by the early church is Jan. 6th which is Tuesday. The word Epiphany means "to show forth, manifest, appear, reveal." The customary text for Epiphany is the one we heard earlier this morning in our Gospel reading---the lesson of the Wise Men. This, as far as we know, was the first appearing of Jesus the Savior to New Testament Gentiles. For that reason Epiphany is often called the Gentile Christmas!

Normally we have sermon texts during the Epiphany season that demonstrate, show forth Jesus as the Son of God through His miracles. This year we will hear of them in our Gospel readings. Our sermon texts, however, through this Epiphany season, will be showing how the Savior was already manifested, appeared and revealed in Old Testament times to the Old Testament Jewish people. We will be following the record of the life of Abraham as recorded in Genesis.

As I was studying for this morning's sermon I was struck by the similarity between the account of the Wise Men and the account of Abram's call. Abram was called from the East, Ur of the Chaldees. He was called by God to go to a land he had never seen. He traveled to Canaan and God promised Him a son from whom would come the Savior.

The Wise Men also came from the East, possibly a little ways from Ur, possibly Babylon. They were called by God through means of the star which had been spoken of in His Word in the book of Numbers. They followed that star, probably over the very same ground Abram traveled some 2,000 years earlier, to the land of Canaan, now called Israel, a land they probably had never seen, until they came to Bethlehem to worship that promised Savior. Very similar indeed.

But as we study this morning's text with the surrounding events we will also see that they are similar to our life as well. And that is our theme this morning:

**THE WAY GOD DEALT WITH ABRAHAM IS TYPICAL
OF THE WAY GOD DEALS WITH US:
I: God called Abraham with His Word.**

The better we understand how God spoke to Abraham the better we will understand what God has to say to us today.

Our text begins with these simple words: **NOW THE LORD HAD SAID TO ABRAM:** Later his name was changed to Abraham. These are simple words, yet we do not know how God chose to do the speaking. We do know that it was a miraculous conversation between almighty, holy God and a sinful human being, a conversation that could never have taken place had God not intervened in Abraham's life.

This took place about 400 years after the Flood and some 280 years since the Tower of Babel incident. During these centuries unbelief made such progress among the descendants of Noah and his sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth that God had to personally intervene if the knowledge of His great promise and plan of salvation were to remain for generations to come. It was almost completely lost.

Notice the sequence of events. God called Abraham, not vice versa. If contact is to be made between God and the sinner, the initiative must come from God, not man. One man wrote: *Every other religion in the world has a founder that says, "I'll show you the way to find God." Only Christianity has a Founder, Jesus that says, "I am God, I have come to find you."*

God chose Abraham to be His child, even in the midst of the idolatrous worship of his nation, yes, even of his own family. It was not Abraham's own reason or strength or choosing that led him

to turn from idol worship and believe in the One true God and the promised Messiah. No, it was God who called Abraham out of darkness into His marvelous light!

And so today we see from God's Word that it is God who calls the sinner. God, who by His grace, reaches out with His Word, both Law and Gospel, to convict the condemned sinner and to convert the repentant sinner. It is His intervention in the lives of individuals through the Means of Grace—His Word and Sacraments.

God's Word says: **GOD IS FAITHFUL, BY WHOM YOU WERE CALLED INTO THE FELLOWSHIP OF HIS SON, JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD...GOD HAS SAVED US AND CALLED US WITH A HOLY CALLING, NOT ACCORDING TO OUR WORKS, BUT ACCORDING TO HIS OWN PURPOSE AND GRACE WHICH WAS GIVEN TO US IN CHRIST JESUS BEFORE TIME BEGAN.**

And what does God use to call sinners like Abraham, like the Wise Men, like you and me to faith? He uses the Gospel. He says: **HE CALLED YOU TO THIS (FAITH) THROUGH OUR GOSPEL, THAT YOU MIGHT SHARE IN THE GLORY OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST...SO THEN FAITH COMES BY HEARING, AND HEARING BY THE WORD OF GOD...AND THAT FROM CHILDHOOD YOU HAVE KNOWN THE HOLY SCRIPTURES, WHICH ARE ABLE TO MAKE YOU WISE FOR SALVATION THROUGH FAITH WHICH IS IN CHRIST JESUS.**

So even as God called Abraham with His Word He calls us to faith with that same Word.

It might seem almost unreasonable, even cruel for God to command a 75 year old man to leave his home and relatives and to travel to an unknown destination. But to build in Abraham a willingness to follow His call, the Lord gave to him a great promise, or more accurately a cluster of promises—7 to be exact. And that is our second point.

**II: God dealt with Abraham, not in terms of demands,
but primarily in terms of promises.**

Yes, God did say: **GET OUT OF YOUR COUNTRY, FROM YOUR FAMILY AND FROM YOUR FATHER'S HOUSE, TO A LAND THAT I WILL SHOW YOU.** That was His command. But God never demands of us something that He has not already provided. God does not demand blind faith or a leap in the dark! Yes, it took faith to trust God and follow His Word, but God gave to Abraham promise after promise upon which his faith could solidly rest. These promises nourished, built up and strengthened his faith and so enabled Abraham to obey the Lord's command.

This truth we should remember and will stress over and over again as we observe Abraham's faith during the next few weeks. Yes, we are to honor Abraham as the father of all who believe. He is one of the Patriarchs of the Old Testament and a hero of faith, but in honoring him we are to glorify God who in grace created Abraham's faith through the power of His Word and sustained it and strengthened it with His many promises.

No doubt it was physically and emotionally hard and painful for Abraham to pack up and leave with the realization he would never see his relatives again. In Heb. 11:8 we read: **BY FAITH ABRAHAM OBEYED WHEN HE WAS CALLED TO GO OUT TO THE PLACE WHICH HE WOULD RECEIVE AS AN INHERITANCE. AND HE WENT OUT, NOT KNOWING WHERE HE WAS GOING.**

What promises were given to Abraham? To this childless 75 year old man and his barren 65 year old wife, God promised: **I WILL MAKE YOU A GREAT NATION; I WILL BLESS YOU AND MAKE YOUR NAME GREAT.** This little known cattleman and shepherd would become famous, even a great nation. So that now some 4,000 years later Abraham is known around the world, by believers and unbelievers alike, by Christians, Jews and Arabs. But he would be great for other reasons. He was called a "friend of God" and "the father of all believers." He is the physical father of both the Jews and the Arabs and he is an ancestor of the Messiah. All of these things made Abraham great. God also promised **I WILL BLESS THOSE WHO BLESS YOU, AND I WILL CURSE HIM WHO CURSES YOU.** What great protection from a loving God!

So even as God dealt with Abraham primarily in terms of promises and not demands, so God also deals with us primarily with the promises of the Gospel of His Son Jesus.

But the greatest blessing, the greatest promise was:

III: God made Abraham a blessing to the whole world through Christ.

God declared: **AND IN YOU ALL THE FAMILIES OF THE EARTH SHALL BE BLESSED.** God promised Abraham that a great descendant would be born to his family who would bring blessings, not only to his family, his descendants, but to every member of the human race.

Abraham knew Jesus Christ. The Messiah had been manifested, revealed to him through these promises of God. Jesus said in John 8:56 **ABRAHAM REJOICED TO SEE MY DAY, AND HE SAW IT AND WAS GLAD.**

The Messiah was manifested, revealed, shown to him. Abraham was saved not by just some faith in an unknown future promise, but by faith in a Person, in One Person, in the only Person who saves!

And that is what makes the Scriptural record of Abraham's life so important. The way Abraham was saved is the same way we are saved today. God didn't have one way for the Old Testament people and another for us of the New Testament. There has always been and will ever be only one way to heaven---by trusting in God's promises as they center in Jesus Christ our only Savior.

God also deals with us primarily in terms of promises. Our obedience of faith, our faith walk, our life of sanctification can only result and come from the working and empowering of the Word upon the heart. Luther once wrote *"Faith does not just lie on the heart like foam on top of a beer; but it is within and empowers the heart to respond to His promises. To tell someone "don't worry, be strong" when a calamity strikes is useful, but to tell them why they can be strong and not worry will give them that ability."*

And that is how we too can be a blessing to the whole world through Christ.

How many people do you know? Hundreds, perhaps a thousand. Everyday we are given blessed opportunities to speak about the promises of God in Christ to our family members, other relatives, friends, fellow workers, classmates, even strangers.

Do you know someone who is depressed? Bring him or her the promise of great joy which shall be to all people: Christ, the Savior!

Do you know someone who is lonely? Bring to him or her the promise of companionship with Jesus who promised: **LO, I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS, EVEN TO THE END OF THE AGE.**

Do you know someone who is under stress and pressure? Bring to them the promise of the Lord's strength: **BUT THOSE WHO WAIT ON THE LORD SHALL RENEW THEIR STRENGTH; THEY SHALL MOUNT UP WITH WINGS LIKE EAGLES, THEY SHALL RUN AND NOT BE WEARY, THEY SHALL WALK AND NOT FAINT... FEAR NOT, FOR I AM WITH YOU; BE NOT DISMAYED, FOR I AM YOUR GOD. I WILL STRENGTHEN YOU, YES, I WILL HELP YOU, I WILL UPHOLD YOU WITH MY RIGHTEOUS RIGHT HAND.'**

To the elderly, sick, dying, fearful, weary, worried, discouraged, tempted, sorrowful, ones plagued by their sins we have the promises of God to give to them and lay on their hearts. **FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY BEGOTTEN SON, THAT WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM SHOULD NOT PERISH BUT HAVE EVERLASTING LIFE... GOD WAS IN CHRIST RECONCILING THE WORLD TO HIMSELF, NOT IMPUTING THEIR TRESPASSES TO THEM, AND HAS COMMITTED TO US THE WORD OF RECONCILIATION. NOW THEN, WE ARE AMBASSADORS FOR CHRIST, AS THOUGH GOD WERE PLEADING THROUGH US: WE IMPLORER YOU ON CHRIST'S BEHALF, BE RECONCILED TO GOD. FOR HE MADE HIM WHO KNEW NO SIN TO BE SIN FOR US, THAT WE MIGHT BECOME THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD IN HIM.**

God has made you and me a blessing to the whole world through Christ and His promises in His Word. How? By making us ambassadors to proclaim a message of salvation. To proclaim a Savior who came to live a perfect life for us and who came to die the sacrificial death for us atoning for our sins and who rose again from the dead assuring us of a resurrection to eternal life.

May our Heavenly Father use us as such ambassadors to His glory.

Amen.