

# Hebrews 11:1, 2, 8-12

Epiphany, Reformation 500 Faith Alone, January 7, 2018

Theme: Sola Fide: Only faith  
I. It trusts what God promises  
II. It receives God's blessing

INJ There are five Reformation "only" statements. After 500 years of history, they illustrate what is distinctive about Lutheran Christian teaching. Do you remember any of the phrases? We talked about them in both their Latin "sola" and English "alone" words. Three are widely used: Sola Scriptura: Scripture alone; Sola Gratia: Grace alone; and Sola Fide: Faith alone. The two others are Solus Christus: Christ alone; and Soli Deo Gloria: To God alone be glory. You have noticed the five flags out by the road have those phrases on them. Today we talk about Sola Fide - only faith.

I think faith is hard for us to talk about because the ways we usually talk about faith twist and distort it into strange shapes. Our lesson gives a clear definition of faith: "being sure about what we hope for, being convinced about things we do not see." As we look at Abraham we see that faith is God connecting with us. Faith trusts what God promises and faith receives God's blessing. We are saved Sola Fide: Only by faith.

Are you sure that what you see is real? Illusionists are masters of misdirection. Computer generated graphics rival reality. The clips you see on your Facebook may be edited. Even the news isn't always factual. The phrase "seeing is believing" doesn't apply anymore. God talks about believing as NOT seeing. Faith isn't blind, in the sense that there is no basis for its confidence. Faith simply takes God at his word. Faith comes from hearing the message. It is being sure and being convinced by something other than our senses. Since God has said it, he cannot lie. That's faith!

This is what Abraham is commended for. God called him to move to a new place. Pick up his wife and possessions and go to a place he would be told about. Leave behind father and familiar surroundings for a trip to who knows where. What did Abraham do? He packed and left. God said it, and he was convinced. It sounds risky, doesn't it? What if the move was dangerous? What if the end wasn't what he wanted? What if? ... What if? Faith takes God at his word and is sure he won't fail.

Abraham arrived in the land. When he got there, people already lived in the towns and on the plains. God told him to look north and south and east and west. All he could see would be his possession! God gave another astounding promise. Abraham would have descendants who would

fill the land. Descendants who would be more numerous than the sand or the stars. These were extravagant promises from the Mighty God!

Now, let's look at Abraham's situation. What did he have?

Abraham was a wealthy man. He had herds and flocks and the people to tend them. Remember that he and Lot had to part ways because they were so prosperous they could not share the same space! Abraham was well respected by the locals. He traveled freely and interacted with rulers and kings. Looking at his life, we might say that Abraham had everything he could want: money, possessions, reputation. If we had all those things, we would be happy, wouldn't we?

Look again. What didn't Abraham have? He did not yet have the two things God had promised! He did not have the land – he lived in tents and did not own a parcel or a home. He did not control a city or a spot to plant crops. And he did not have a child – no son to carry the promise of God. No heir to pass on his name. Abraham couldn't see the fulfillment, but he lived by faith, trusting God to do what he had promised.

God said there would be a child. God said there would be a permanent spot in the land. Even when nothing looked the way God described it, Abraham was sure of what was promised. Faith is being convinced – not by what we see, but by what God says. Abraham looked for a city that had foundations not of stone or bedrock, but eternal foundations on the Promised Savior. God would not fail to keep his word.

Because of this faith, Abraham didn't fit with his society. He was a nomad, wandering around with no permanent home. He expected a son, but he was aging quickly. If you met him, you would notice he didn't behave like a pagan idol worshiper. You would hear of the God who had made him those promises. The land! The son! Those were just the first steps in God's plan. Abraham looked forward to the promised Savior, and he showed it by the way he lived, a stranger in his own land.

Peter was the same in our Gospel. People were talking about Jesus as a prophet or a ghost or a special man. Peter confessed: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Those words, that statement of faith, were not Peter's concoction. By looking at a humble, thirty year old rabbi he didn't see God. God revealed it to him by faith. Peter's confession stands as the foundation for the Christian Church for all time. By faith we say the same thing: Jesus is God who forgives sin and gives eternal life!

We don't really fit into the modern or postmodern society we live in, either. Empty commercialism is empty. The chase for more gadgets, more entertainment, is less than rewarding. Focusing on my inner desires, my personal emotions, my experience doesn't exactly inspire confidence or

joy, but the opposite. Sin and failure and shame are what I come up with. Yet you know what is different and reliable and rewarding. You know God's promises. "Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born for you." In him you have peace with God, the forgiveness of sins. You know that this temporary life will end, and you have a permanent home with Jesus in heaven. You live with eyes and ears focused on your Savior. You live obviously trusting what God promises. That is Sola Fide: only faith.

When you aren't all that – when you do melt into our godless society, then Jesus calls you back by his words. He turns you away from the wide road, the disaster that awaits, the sin that ensnares. He gives you a promise of forgiveness in his name. How could it be true? God says it. How can he say such a thing to wretched rebellious sinner me? He does. Right there in his word. Faith is being sure. Being convinced that what God says is true. It is. Jesus has risen from the grave to prove it! We live by faith. We are strangers in this world, looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

Where does such a faith come from? No, I don't make my own faith. Faith comes from hearing the message. Faith trusts what God has promised, and it is not deterred by what looks different from God's word. No, faith is not guessing or insurance or hoping for the best. Faith is confidence that God does what God says. No, faith can't be an inside thing hidden from the world, either. Faith lives boldly looking ahead to the fulfillment. God will do it! While we wait, we are not without. God supplies his blessing right now. You have it Sola Fide: only by faith.

Go back to Abraham. He was a hundred years old. Sarah his wife was 90. They still didn't have a child. Where would he come from? God promised they would bear a son. Despite all the questions and impossibilities, they were sure it would happen. How? When? Then, it did. Isaac was the name given to him. Isaac means "laughter." They were so happy! They had received what God promised.

Notice something about faith, though. Faith didn't bring the child. God did. Faith doesn't reach out to make the blessings of God happen. Faith just receives them. When God does what he promised, faith rejoices in it. Isaac wasn't born because of anything Abraham did. In fact, if you remember any of the Bible History, when Abraham got his fingers into things, he only messed it up! Faith merely receives the blessing God gives.

Through Isaac came more descendants of Abraham – Jacob and his twelve sons and all the people who filled those tribes. You know the important names: Judah, Boaz and Ruth, David, Solomon, all the way down to Joseph and Mary – to the one Son who completely fulfills the promise

given to Abraham: Jesus.

You receive that Son only by faith: Sola Fide. Jesus has done for you exactly the things you could never do for yourself. Jesus stood under the law and kept it perfectly for you. Jesus sacrificed himself on the cross to pay your debt for sin. Jesus rose victorious from the grave to proclaim your forgiveness is won. Jesus sent his Holy Spirit to you in Baptism to make you his dear child. Jesus comes to you in the Lord's Supper to assure you of his peace. Jesus dwells richly in your heart by the words you hear. You have received the blessings of God! They are yours Sola Fide: only by faith.

In fact, you are a descendant of Abraham by faith. You are one of the many nations who call him Father even if you don't have any of his blood in your veins. All who have the faith of Abraham are the children of Abraham. Baby Charlotte was given that faith this morning in Baptism. The blessings of God Almighty come to you Sola Fide: only by faith.

Our Second Lesson emphasized that faith in God's promise is a function of the gospel, not the law. It wasn't Abraham's obedience that secured for him God's blessings. Righteousness is not ours because of the works we do. It is ours because God gives it. The Lord credited righteousness to Abraham. Faith is the way God makes the connection with us, but the faith is also God's gift. It receives the blessings of God. It is valuable because of the object it has confidence in: Jesus Christ.

When God gives faith, he puts into a heart the being sure and the being convinced. God's gift brings a change to us – a visible change. Faith shows itself in the way we behave. In the things we say and do. The priorities in our lives and the patterns we follow. Abraham lived as a stranger in the land, looking forward to the city with eternal foundations. We have the same goal! We live Sola Fide: only by faith.

How does that look in your life? I can't tell you the details, but when the blessings of God are yours, you are different from the world. It involves time with God's word at home and at church. It is using time and skills and money to support the gospel message. It is speaking the Good News to others. It is all kinds of things, the things you do with your eyes fixed on Jesus and your ears filled with his promises. Sola Fide: only faith.

God has promised us blessings. We have received them. More are coming. We wait. We can't see the progress and we don't know when, but God will do it. Even if we face pain and hardship and severe testing, God is faithful. He will not fail. We are sure about what we hope for and we are convinced about things we do not see. God will do what he says! This faith is God's gift, trusting Jesus and receiving his gifts. God makes us strikingly different from our world. We live Sola Fide: only by faith. SDG Amen.