

## *The Greatest Stump Speech of All*

Second Sunday in Lent  
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Genesis 12:1-4a; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

They're out and about, our various presidential candidates—flipping pancakes, kissing babies, donning work hats, speaking with organizations of all stripes, sipping coffee and eating burgers in greasy spoons across the country. They're on the move, attempting to convince the electorate why they should receive their votes.

I follow it with great interest. My husband and I often flip between the CNN crew and the MSNBC crew and the FOX crew, just to get all the different perspectives. We hear the sound bytes of stump speeches in Texas and Virginia and New Hampshire, and in the not too distant future, we'll hear them in Pennsylvania. I follow it with interest, but not because I've begun to rally around a particular candidate, nor because I've grown cynical and watch it all with horrid fascination. What I find interesting is the innate character of those characters who are running, and the punditry the media offers. We, the American voters, have been told that the candidates and parties are running on distinct and diametrically-opposed themes: Experience and Change. There are the candidates who claim to be seasoned professionals, and thus able to lead the nation well through challenging times. There are the candidates who say they offer a new vision, new direction, to lead the nation beyond the status quo course that they claim has mired us in so much woe. Whether they offer Experience or Change, the candidates make bold promises for the future. And when a candidate finds the right stump speech, the right words of promise that resonate with the listeners, they repeat those promises again and again in each new venue.

You could describe the Lord God's words to Abram in our Old Testament lesson as a stump speech of sorts. Minus the pancake-flipping. In fact, this is one of the most incredible speeches in all the tradition of Israel, and it is pure promise. *"I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."*

Pretty heady stuff—this sound byte covers a lot of territory. Descendants a-plenty for Abram, with his name known by all to boot; continual blessings showered upon Abram as well as these generations to come, and a promise that somehow the entire world would be impacted in a positive way—yea, blessed because of the Lord God's relationship and work with this one man, Abram.

The promises we read here in Genesis mark a pivotal moment early on in the Biblical narrative. The focus is no longer on general humanity, but on a particular person through whom will come a particular nation. Through Abram, or Abraham, as we usually know him, will come the

creation of the nation Israel, given birth by the promises we read today. Israel—chosen, blessed, and sent forth in faith and obedience by the Lord God who presents his stump speech this day to Abram.

But should Abram trust the promise-maker? After all, consider the promises of our political candidates. Perhaps their promises are quite heartfelt and sincere. But the candidates get into office and promises go by the wayside, getting lost in the partisan debate of the legislative process, or the minutia of governmental regulations. Worse yet, sometimes those who are elected flip-flop on the issues, their promises becoming like those pancakes they turned over so vigorously. Making the voter wonder about the worth of their vote. Making them distrustful of just about anyone in politics.

But Abram chooses to trust the promise-maker. He lays claim to the promises given here by doing what was commanded by the Lord God just prior to the stump speech: *“Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.’”*

Hmmm. This was more than Abram simply going to his local precinct, pressing a couple levers or learning how to use the voter touch screen, and then going back home again. You know, our political candidates offer us the world, but right now all they seek in return is our vote—well, occasionally they seek our campaign dollars to fill their coffers, but mostly they just want our vote. And that will be enough. This isn’t at all what the Lord God wants from Abram. The Lord God wants Abram to follow him. And if Abram would do so, it means he wouldn’t be going back home at all. He would journey to a new home. He would enter the unknown, and that is not without risk. Yet, this was the way to lay hold of God’s promises. This was the path to blessing and life and a new nation and a future of blessings for the world. Abram only lays claim to the promises as he lives in trust and utter dependence upon the God who makes those promises.

If we study the entire Old Testament, God’s promises don’t really alter all that much. God doesn’t flip-flop. The Lord does indeed bring Abram’s descendants to a new land. He does indeed raise up faithful judges, wise prophets, and good kings to lead the nation Israel in following God in order to continue receiving those blessings from him, as he promised. Instead, it will be Israel who flip-flops. Between obedience and disobedience. Between faithful devotion and roaming hearts. Between dependent trust and the desire to go solo. As noted in story after story in the Bible, Israel’s response to the Lord God is the real problem here. The problem is certainly not with the promise-maker.

In fact, while our present-day political candidates have to align themselves either as the Experience candidate or the Change candidate, the Lord God holds both those characteristics within himself in glorious tension. God offers Abram and the generations who follow him a God of experience—a God who existed before anything was; whose powerful breath of life brought all that is **into** existence; who knows his creation and particularly us, his creatures, deeply, intimately, to our very core; and who (as our Psalmist says today) will neither slumber nor sleep on his eternal watch over us. At the same time, when Israel flip-flopped, when God’s chosen people chose to turn from him, and stopped trusting him, the Lord God had to do a new thing.

So the Lord God is also a God of change. Just as these verses in Genesis are God's pivotal stump speech for Abram, we have here in the Gospel of John words which are a pivotal announcement in their own right. Words of promise spoken once again, only now wrapped up in the person and deeds of Jesus Christ. As Jesus tells Nicodemus, *"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."*

See? Same basic promises—blessings from God, real life to be lived and savored in his eternal presence, and the possibility of an entire world renewed by hope for a future—but now, these promises are delivered in a new and novel way. For since these promises could **not** be fulfilled to the extent that the Lord God intended through **Israel**, the Lord God decided to offer a change—he would offer his promises and then fulfill them through **himself**.

Which is exactly what the Lord God has done this day for Blair Steven. This is baby-kissing at its finest! Here, baptismal waters have kissed Blair's forehead, while the Word welcomed Blair into new life with God. Promises made and promises delivered through the crucified, risen Christ. This day Blair has been chosen, blessed, and sent forth in Christ's name, which may very well mean journeying into the unknown. But, in the years to come, as he places his trust in God, Blair will discover Christ's Spirit leading him, sustaining him, and shining the light of his love through him. For that, we say together: **AMEN**.