

I've taken up a new hobby recently: gardening. But not just any gardening. Hydroponic gardening. You see, I've dabbled in gardening for years. I love plants. I love the science of botany. I love the idea of growing my own herbs and vegetables.

But I hate being outdoors. I hate the heat. I hate the humidity. I hate getting dirty and wet and sore all over from digging and weeding. It's just not for me. Which poses a problem if you want to garden.

Hydroponic gardening gets around all of that. Because everything is in a nice, clean indoor unit. Bright LED lights above. Water and nutrient tank beneath. And in between, basil and thyme and dill and mint. Red leaf lettuce. Green leaf lettuce. All growing at an incredible rate. Because they are always kept in the perfect conditions. Just like me.

It's a lot of fun. But it's also eye opening. Without the soil to obscure things, you really see how the plants grow. And the first time I opened up the unit to clean the water tank, I was rather amazed.

Because while the plants above were only a few weeks old and only a couple inches high, the roots underneath were enormous. Great shaggy masses of long white tendrils, stretching from top to bottom. Sucking up as much water and liquid fertilizer as I could feed them. So that, eventually, the sprouts above would become the full, green plants I wanted them to be.

For a plant to grow, it must have good roots. That's true of any plant, from the smallest herb to the biggest trees. And when we look at plants, we are largely seeing the end result of the work that the roots have been doing below the surface.

And that's something that's true of God's family tree as well. The tree of Jesse didn't start from the branches up above. It started down below.

We heard last week about the seed that God first planted for that tree. A seed planted just after the creation of the world, when Adam and Eve first fell into sin. And God promised that the offspring – the seed – of the woman would bruise the devil's head, while being himself bruised on the heel. It was an amazing prophecy of a savior. Of a new family tree for God and humanity, to replace the one killed by sin.

But trees don't grow overnight. They take time. In the case of this particular tree, a very long time. And over thousands of years, that tree was growing. Growing the same way that all trees grow, that all plants grow: by growing roots.

In particular, it grew a root named Abraham. Abraham is a name we know well. And yet, one that we don't think about often. Probably because he is a root in Jesse's tree. And like all roots, he's not as visible. He's under the surface. Buried in the Old Testament.

But he's also worth examining. Because you don't get the rest of the tree without starting with good roots. And Abraham was a very, very important root.

I chose as our Gospel readings last week and this week two of the nativity songs of Luke: The Song of Zechariah, also known as the Benedictus, and the Song of Mary, also known as the Magnificat. Both songs are beautiful testimonies of God's salvation. Praising him for bringing a savior into the world.

But, you'll notice, both of them also see the beginning – the root – of that plan being revealed in Abraham. Zechariah says, *“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel... to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham.”* Mary tells us, *“[God] has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”*

They don't see Jesus as just some sudden decision on God's part to have mercy on humanity. No, Jesus is the culmination of a plan begun long ago. The fulfillment of a covenant that God made with Abraham and all his descendants. The tree of Jesse is also the tree of Abraham.

And that family tree isn't merely a biological family tree. Sure, Abraham is part of Jesus' genealogy. Matthew's Gospel actually begins by spelling that out. Chapter 1, verse 1 states, "*The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.*" Luke's genealogy doesn't highlight Abraham quite so much, but he's definitely still there in the list.

So we know Abraham was an ancestor of Jesus. But we could have assumed that simply by the fact that Mary was Jewish. Jesus' genetics aren't really the issue here.

No, the family tree I'm talking about is a spiritual family tree. A family tree built by faith. But faith in what?

Certainly, we know that Abraham was a man of great faith. He had faith to travel from a luxurious life in Haran to an unknown land, purely at the Lord's command. He had faith to believe that God would make him a great nation, even though he had no sons. He had faith to believe that God would give him a son, even though his wife was elderly and unable to have children.

Abraham was not a perfect man. But by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, he did one thing right his entire life: he trusted God's promises. He believed that if God said he would do something, then he would do it. Period.

It was that trust in God's promises that would lead him to the act of faith we read about in our Old Testament lesson today. "*Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.*"

Take your son and offer him as a burnt offering. Take your son and use him in a human sacrifice. Take your son, your only son, and kill him.

And Abraham is willing to do it. He doesn't ask why. He already knows the answer: because God says so. Abraham has spent his entire life doing things because God said so. He's not going to stop now.

And yet, was it purely blind obedience that led Abraham to take Isaac up that mountain? No. No, once again it was that same trust in God's promises that drives Abraham's actions.

Back in Genesis 17, a few chapters prior, God tells Abraham, "*Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him.*"

Isaac is just a boy. He has no offspring. Which means that no matter what it looks like God is doing, Isaac must survive this. Even if it means that Abraham kills Isaac and then God raises him from the dead. Somehow, somehow, Isaac will live.

Because Abraham knows that he is not the top of Jesse's tree. He is the root of the tree. Everything that follows depends on his family surviving and growing and establishing a foundation of faith upon which God's entire plan of salvation rests. And so Abraham trusts God's promises. He believes God's Word.

And what is the result? All the nations of the earth are blessed because Abraham obeyed God's voice. All the nations of the earth are blessed because Abraham had faith in the resurrection.

Abraham's faith is no different than our faith. We are all one family tree in Christ through our common faith that God can – and does – raise the dead. And that when God the Father was faced with that same choice as Abraham, to take his Son onto a mountain and sacrifice him, he did so without hesitation.

Not because he is a God of death who enjoys human sacrifice. But because he is a God of life who gives new life to those who trust his promises. To those who believe that even though we die, yet shall we live. And whoever lives and believes in Jesus Christ will never die.

God established an everlasting covenant with Abraham. A covenant to bring him into a promised land, make him a great nation, and bless all the nations of the earth through Abraham's son. In Holy Baptism and the promises of His Word, God has established an everlasting covenant with us as well.

A covenant to bring us into the promised land of the resurrection. A covenant to make us a great nation, an eternal kingdom of God. A covenant to bless all the nations of the earth through His Son by making disciples of all nations through Baptism and His Word.

The root of our faith is the faith of Abraham. Because the root of our faith is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Amen.