A father was quizzing his daughter’s fiancée about his future plans. “To what profession do you aspire?” he asked him. “I am going to be a Torah scholar,” the young man replied. “Then how will you support my daughter in her accustomed manner?” he inquired. “I will study,” answered the fiancée, “and God will provide.” “But how will you provide for children?” the father persisted. “Don’t worry,” he assured him. “God will provide.” To every concern that was raised, the response was the same: “God will provide.” Later the father reported to his wife, “He has no job and no plans, but the good news is he thinks I am God.”

Do you identify more with the simple faith of the young man just beginning adult life – “God will provide, no matter what”? Or with the more practical, self-reliant approach of the seasoned veteran – “I will provide, just in case”? What do you think it really means to have faith in God? How are we to grow “strong in [our] faith,” in the words of our second reading?

The scriptures for this Second Sunday in Lent certainly teach us about trusting and believing in God. In our first reading from Genesis, God made the astounding promise to Abraham in his very old age that he would be “the ancestor of a multitude of nations” – not by Ishmael, his son by a young slave woman, but through a son (Isaac) yet unborn to his elderly wife, Sarah. How unbelievable was that to Abraham!

The verse following today’s lesson reads, “Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, ‘Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?’” “How ridiculous!” Abraham was thinking. “This makes no sense. If God really wanted to do this, why did he wait so long? Could he not have chosen a more usual time in our lives to raise this history-changing child? This is too much to ask. This is not really going to happen!” Such incredulous thoughts ran through his head as he rolled around on the ground chuckling to himself, laughing at God!

Yet God persisted, and Abraham soon took God seriously and trusted in what God told him and asked of him. He accepted God’s promise and his covenant and obeyed all its requirements, including establishing circumcision as the sign of the covenant for himself and all the males of his household. We can only imagine the resistance and disbelief he must have faced in
implementing this new ritual! “God told you we should do what?!?” Talk about needing to have a strong faith!

But Abraham faced a much greater and agonizing struggle four chapters (and some years in Isaac’s life) later. In one of the most puzzling stories in the Bible, God asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac – or at least (as it turned out) to prepare to do so. By that time, Abraham had so learned to trust in God that he never wavered. Although any parent would recoil at the demand to sacrifice a child, and particularly so in Abraham’s case because the loss of Isaac would have rendered God’s covenantal promise impossible, Abraham somehow moved determinedly ahead to gather the wood and the knife and the fire needed for this offering of sacrifice. This demonstration of unshakeable trust in God so moved God that (as shown on your bulletin cover), the angel of the Lord stopped Abraham from going any further; and Isaac and Abraham and his many descendants, both in the flesh and in the faith, were spared. We were spared because Abraham did not have to give up his son. While he was willing to, he was not asked to.

What a model of faith Abraham is to us! It is not surprising that three major world religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all trace their foundation back to this man of unwavering faith. He accomplished nothing great; he was not especially learned; he was not a business or political or even religious leader. He at first laughed at God’s promise. But look on your bulletin insert at what Paul has to say about him in our second reading, starting about half way into the reading on the line that begins, “that do not exist.”): “Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become the father of many nations; according to what was said, ‘So numerous shall your descendants be.’ He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old) [a bit of Paul’s humor coming out!], or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith ‘was reckoned to him as righteousness.” (Keep that place for a minute.)

That is the call of today’s scripture readings to us, that we grow strong in our faith and give glory to God, fully convinced that God is able to do what he has promised, that our faith may be reckoned to us as righteousness. Paul ends this part of his letter to the early Christians in Rome (going back to where we left off – the last two sentences of the reading): “Now the words, ‘it was reckoned to him,’ were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will also be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.”
The promise that God has made to us is communicated through the person of Jesus. He not only conquered death for us by rising from the dead (as Paul proclaims here), he also promised to be with us (in the final words of Matthew’s Gospel) “always, to the end of the age.”

Though God’s promise of faithful presence and eternal life through the person of Jesus may often seem to us ethereal and unreal, it is what God calls us to believe. When, like Abraham, that assurance may seem to us ludicrous and impossible, we are invited to move beyond that doubt and to emulate our patriarch’s faith. In the midst of sickness or discouragement or loneliness or failure or betrayal or the death of those we love, we are to believe and trust in the unfailing redeeming presence of God. When our own limited time in this life is coming to an end, we are to give “glory to God, fully convinced that God [is] able to do what he ha[s] promised.”

Because Abraham believed God’s promise to him, he did become “the ancestor of a multitude nations” and the foundation of countless generations of believers across the ages and across the world. As Abraham’s children in the faith, we are also all called to believe in God’s promise to us, made known through the resurrection and enduring presence of Jesus. We are, in the words of our second reading, to grow “strong in [our] faith,” to give “glory to God, fully convinced that God is able to do what he ha[s] promised.”

Genesis 17:1-7,15-16; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38