

It must have been a “fall on your face” kind of moment. The point at which he’d finally had enough. Because by now, Abram had been through plenty. God had made some pretty big asks of him: “Pack up your whole family!” God said. “Leave your homeland! Live in a weird alien place where the king wants your wife! Part ways with your nephew—no, now go save your nephew!”

All the while, God had been promising to make Abram a blessing, to make his name great, and to give him countless descendants, none of which has happened.

And now, in our first reading, Abram is 99 years old. And God repeats, “I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.”

It is then, Scripture tells us, that Abram falls on his face.

Perhaps the face-plant is out of reverence. Or perhaps the sight is blinding, and Abram needs to shield his eyes.

Or maybe Abram falls on his face because he is just fed up with God. It’s possible Abram sees a kind of dark humor in the outrageous promise. In verse 17, just after our reading today ends, Abram falls on his face in the middle of God’s speech *again*, and this time, he laughs, saying, “Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old?”

Abram falls and laughs because of the incongruity of it all. His call from God demands more faith than he currently has, and the future God promises for him seems irreconcilable with his present circumstance.

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I can clearly remember the last time I was in a spot like Abram’s. I was on Internship, the required year of service in an ELCA congregation before being ordained. I was serving a congregation and living in New York City, in Manhattan. I was finally “on my own,” so to speak, no longer a divinity student, but not yet a full pastor. And it was the first year I had real-life income.

The stipend I received for serving on Internship was ... not that much ... by Manhattan standards. See, every Intern in the ELCA is paid in the same way and in the same amount no matter where she or he serves: the sponsoring congregation provides housing and pays the Intern's healthcare premium, (a blessing that makes the required year of service possible for many). And then each Intern, whether living in New York City or North Dakota, was paid \$1100 a month.

After taxes, that meant I had \$954 a month to live on. In Manhattan. My budget was going to be tight, but doable. Internship year... the church ... God was asking a lot with this set-up, but I felt I could keep to it.

... Until a certain staff meeting early on in the year. It was the congregation's annual stewardship time, and the Senior Pastor announced that, as was the tradition, she was hoping and hopeful that all members of the pastoral staff would tithe to the church.

Tithe—meaning give ten percent of their income to the congregation. To me, that was asking ... a lot. I even thought, "Well, I may not be a member of the pastoral staff..." but my title was clear: Pastoral Intern. The Senior Pastor ... Internship year ... the church ... God was making a pretty big ask.

But I was hopeful that I could find a way to give \$95.40 a month to the church, so I sat down to do the math. And I couldn't do it. I rearranged categories and lowered estimated costs and tried to imagine living without entire budget lines. But I couldn't figure a way to tithe. Tears of frustration welled up in my eyes. I put my hands in my head and I fell on my face, so to speak.

I put the papers away. And I spent three days praying and thinking and remembering God's promise. I remembered all the sermons I'd heard about Christ giving us *abundant* life, so we need not have a mindset of scarcity. I remembered old stewardship drives that promised how with Christ, *there is always enough*. And I remembered the promise God had made to me in baptism—which for me had turned into this long and winding process of becoming a pastor—and that if God was *that* faithful for *that* long, well, then I could try to tithe for a year.

And I did. I returned to the budget sheets three days later. And I figured it out. Every month, I gave \$95.40 to the church while still having enough for basic living expenses. And I've continue to tithe every year since.

Now, I'm not Abram. And my story of being laid bare by the invitation to tithe is nothing compared to what God asked Abram to do. But in the small ways my and his experiences are similar: tithing demanded more faith than I had at that time and seemed irreconcilable with my present circumstances. The prospect of giving ten percent of my modest income while living in the most expensive city seemed fall-on-my-face impossible. Yet by remembering the promise I had heard repeatedly, I decided to step out on faith, and God followed through on the promise to provide.

What makes you fall on your face? What task or circumstance do you face that requires more faith than you currently have? What invitations has God given you to step into a future that seems irreconcilable with your present? For when God makes these requests, we may fall down. But like Abram, we don't stay face-planted. God repeats the promise again and again until it gets us to step out on faith.

You don't have to go as far back as Abram to see examples of that; we can see it in the history of this congregation: The times LCOS has borrowed from its savings to pay the staff, the months I'm told the treasurer held checks until enough offerings came in, the Novembers where we end the year looking at a big deficit. But each time, this congregation finds a way to step out on faith. We've remembered God's promise by washing in the font and eating from this table, and sharing what we have. And then, we discover that God's provision and Christ's abundance far exceed our expectations.

Our Lenten stewardship drive gives us an opportunity to see God's promise at work. We may feel like the commitment sheets demand more faith than we currently have or being asked to give or give more seems irreconcilable with our present circumstances. *As Jesus asks at the end of the Gospel reading today, "Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?" we say, "Indeed, what can we give in return for our lives?"* By stepping out on faith to give, God's promise comes in and calls us toward a life is so much richer and fuller than we can imagine.

AMEN.