

Genesis 17:1-7. *When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. ²Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers." ³Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, ⁴"As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. ⁵No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. ⁶I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. ⁷I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.*

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

It seemed hopeless. Impossible. It wasn't going to happen. It had been 24 years since God first promised him a son and to this point there was nothing! He was 99 years old. His wife was 89. They were well passed the childbearing years. Every shred of hope of them having a son had long ago been swept away. It also appears to have been 13 years since they had heard from God. It was only natural to wonder if God had forgotten about them. It was only natural to assume that it was never going to happen. They looked into an impossible future. The obstacles before them seemed too big and the wall seemed too difficult to get over.

Here we stand today on the precipice of a new year. In reality Tuesday isn't going to be any different of a day than Monday. The number of the year will be different, but nature itself won't change. Yet stepping from Monday into Tuesday this week as we go from 2018 to 2019 always seems to be a monumental step. We keep track of the years to give ourselves a reason to pause and look at the blessings of the past and to contemplate the possibilities of the future. Looking back to the past can be easy...but looking forward to the future can be difficult. Many sit here today never imagining a year ago that you would be here today. Yet here you are. God brought you here. God watched over you and protected you. God had things in mind for you which you couldn't possibly have imagined. This is what makes us both excited and anxious about the future. What does God have in mind for you this next year? How does your future look? Rosy and Great? Full of abundant blessings? Or will there be insurmountable and impossible challenges? Will your year be full of difficulties and problems you can't possibly know about today? Here's the problem as we look to the future—we don't know what the future holds. Just because everything looks great today doesn't mean we won't face a challenge tomorrow. And just things are difficult and challenging today doesn't mean they won't lighten up in a month. This uncertainty can be scary as we contemplate what comes before us. God came to Abram with certainty about his impossible future and today, God gives that same certainty to you and to me. No matter what we face in the year ahead of us, whether good or bad, we have this assurance: ***El Shaddai Goes With Us.***

We don't put a lot of stock in the meaning of our names. In other words, most of the time people today don't give their children a name because of what it means. They might give the child a name of a relative or dear friend. They might give their child a name which sounds nice but is different and unique from many others around them. There are any number of reasons a parent would give a certain name to a child, but often it is not because of what the name means.

We might not put a lot of stock in the meaning of our names but God puts stock into the meaning of his names. God uses specific names for himself to highlight or emphasize certain characteristics about himself. So the names which are used for God in the first verse of our text really jump out at us. We're told that when Abram was 99 years old, "***The LORD***" appeared to him. This was name used to point to God as a God a free and faithful grace. This wasn't an evil overlord who enjoyed watching those under him suffer and be miserable. This wasn't a god who cared nothing for those whom he ruled over. No, this was the God of free and faithful grace. This was the God who cared for his people even though they sinned against him. This was the God who loved his people and was faithful in his love to his people even when they were unfaithful to him. The God of free and faithful grace approached Abram to make promise and identified himself this way, "***I am God Almighty.***" The Hebrew here is El Shaddai. The root of this word means "to display power." As Abram looked at what seemed to be an impossible situation and a wall way too difficult to overcome, the God of free and faithful grace appeared to him with a promise and in so doing reminded him of his power. All power belonged to him. He not only held great power, he held power over all things. His power was so great he could compel nature to act contrary to itself. This was the God who had created nature. He had the power with his almighty word to create this world and this universe and everything in it. This God who was full of free and faithful grace for his people and who had the power to compel nature to act contrary to itself came to Abram with a promise:

"Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers." ³Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, ⁴"As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. ⁵No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. ⁶I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. ⁷I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you." This was not a new promise or covenant that God was making with Abram. He had already made this promise to him recorded in Genesis 15 twenty-four years earlier. A covenant is a binding contract. God had placed himself under obligation to Abram and his future descendants not only to make him into a great nation but to bless him above everyone else by being an ancestor to the coming Messiah who would rescue his people from their sins. God had solemnly ratified

this covenant. Now the time had come to implement this covenant and bring it to fulfillment. God was going to do for Abram that which was impossible—give him and his wife a son at their advanced age against the laws of nature. He gave him a new name—Abraham—as a seal or a guarantee that he would keep the covenant which he made. When his time was right, God implanted his plan and did the impossible. Martin Luther once said, “It’s God’s way to empty a man first before filling him with his blessing.” God emptied Abraham of any hope that he would bring this about by himself before filling him with blessing to display his grace and power not only to Abraham but to you and me today! El Shaddai went with him.

El Shaddai goes with you and me into this new year as well. As we think about the covenant God made with Abraham, we can’t help but think about the covenant he made with us. That’s right. God made a similar covenant with you. It wasn’t a covenant to make you into many nations or that kings would come from you. It certainly wasn’t a covenant to send the Savior of the world through your line. We know that already happened. But at your baptism, the God of free and faithful grace came through those precious waters with His Word and displayed his power by making a covenant with you. There are many today in our world who downplay the role of baptism to only a symbol or representation of what God has done for us. Scripture tells us something much different. It describes baptism as a powerful tool through which God washes away our sin and brings us into his family! At your baptism, God placed himself under obligation to forgive your sins in Jesus and bring you into his family. This wasn’t something you earned or deserved but something which God did out of his free and faithful grace. In so doing, as a member of his family, God also promised to use his power to protect you, to watch over you and to guide you through this life to the eternal home which Jesus made possible for you.

What a promise this is as we consider the uncertain year which lies before us. We may not know what this year will hold, but God does. The God who holds all power, whose power is able to make even nature act contrary to itself and is full of free and faithful grace knows exactly what you are you are going to face this coming year. This God goes with you into the new year. With him comes his power. We just saw that power displayed again through eyes of faith as God fulfilled his promise to Abraham and acted contrary to nature by sending his only Son into this world as the God-man through the virgin Mary. The same power God displayed in the immaculate conception of Jesus; the same power Jesus displayed in healing the sick, calming storms, changing water into wine and in not only raising the dead but raising himself from the dead goes with you into this new year. El Shaddai who made an agreement with you at your baptism, comes to you on the doorstep of a new year to remind you of his intent to implement that agreement in this new year no matter what you are going to face. While God may allow some difficult and challenging situations in this new year, while he may allow some impossible and seemingly insurmountable situations this new year, he promises that He and his power go with you.

As Abraham listened to God’s intent to implement his covenant and to use his power to do something completely contrary to nature, he could only bow his head in adoration and worship of his God. Apart from God’s grace, he as a creature of clay and bound to the laws of nature could never had hoped to have numerous descendants, nonetheless one who would be the Savior of the world. As Abraham worshipped God for his grace and power, God directed his response moving forward: *“walk before me faithfully and be blameless.”* Of course, God wasn’t here telling Abraham the only way he would keep this covenant is if Abraham were perfect before him. That no one could do. The sense here is that of being “complete” and “sound”. The Lord was telling Abram that in all he thought, said and did, he was to be fully conscious that the Lord is the Almighty God who could compel nature to act contrary to itself. He was to walk before the Lord fully aware that the Omnipotent God was making him a promise. He was to make sure that no vital feature of a godly life was absent. He was to trust that the God of almighty power went with him into the future and recognize this by living as God’s child and following God’s commands.

We are not Abraham’s children by natural descent. But we are his children spiritually. And as we move into this new year, we are to have the same humble attitude. As we recognize our unworthiness for the grace God has shown us, we cannot help but stop and worship him. We think about how many times we have let fear and doubt about an uncertain future cause us unnecessary grief, anguish and anxiety. We think about how many times we have tried to rely on our own power and strength to face insurmountable problems and despaired of God and his help. We think about how many times we have taken matters into our own hands rather than placing them into God’s hands. We would deserve God to cast us away from him eternally because of this. Yet, El Shaddai comes to us again and reminds us of the covenant of grace he made to us at our baptism. All of these sins were washed away at our baptism. God cleansed us of our sin and graciously brought us into his family. Having experienced this great power of God in the past, we can go confidently into the future. We bow our heads in humble adoration of God’s amazing grace and we walk faithfully into the future seeking to be blameless as we trust his power goes with us. Let this be our focus on this next year: not the challenges or trials that block our path, not the insurmountable difficulties or improbable issues that we will face; but with our focus on his grace and power to walk faithfully and be blameless to worship our God and trust fully in him.

No, we don’t know what the future holds. We don’t know what will come a week from now, a month from now or a year from now. But the God of free and faithful grace does. He has displayed his power and grace to us in the past by sending our Savior and bringing us to faith and into his family. We can be confident he will display that same power and grace as we go forward into the future. You may look out today over the new year before us with every human shred of hope swept away from you. Let God strengthen your faith and empower you as you go forward into this new year. El Shaddai Goes With You. Amen.