

Sermon - 02-28-21
Ps 22; Gen 17:1-7, 15-16; Ro 4:13-25; Mk 8:31-38
2nd Sunday in Lent

There was an honorable man who lived in a great city of the Fertile Crescent. There were plenty of gods in that country: gods of storm, wind and rain – gods and goddesses of fortune, plenty and fertility. But our man heard another voice. We cannot know what that was like for Abram. We read and allow this story to inform us by faith. *Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up* (1 Cor 8:1). This God – whose name we learn is God Almighty (El Shaddai) – first called to the man when he was seventy-five years old, back in Haran (Gen 12:4). Then, when Abram was eighty-six, Ishmael was born to him by the Egyptian handmaiden, Hagar (16:15-16). Now, the writer of Genesis tells us our hero is ninety-nine years old (17:1). The Lord isn't rushing into anything, is He?

God names Himself in this scene. God also renames Abram and Sarai. And El Shaddai brings the promise (covenant) up to date. Abraham means father of nations. Sarah means princess. Note that the covenant promise includes both the man and the woman. For us, as we remember and relive the story – Abraham is linked to King David and the royal blood line that culminates in Jesus Christ. Sarah has her part in this – the great blessing of being the mother of nations and kings of nations. If Mary of Nazareth had to wait as long as Sarah, she would have had white hair by the time Jesus was born. As it turned out, she was a girl when Baby Jesus came into the world. Sarah was ninety when Isaac was born. That is also a miracle.

Abraham and Sarah's lives have had many turnings, and changes and journeys – but this promise they have been given doesn't change. The One who makes the covenant is eternal and entirely faithful. We humans may waver in our ability to trust and believe Him – but God remains the only One – the Almighty – who keeps faith even with the unfaithful.

Now, we tend to think of a covenant in terms of our courts of law – contracts, deeds, warrants and guarantees. God has not produced a document nor an institution. Covenant is a verb, not a noun. God is not static and still, but ever moving and transforming what is into what is not yet fully formed. The writer of Hebrews reminds us of the active character of our God. *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old gained approval.*

By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible. (Hebrews 11:1-3 NASB)

By an act of faith, Abraham said yes to God's call to travel to an unknown place that would become his home. When he left he had no idea where he was going. By an act of faith he lived in the country promised him, lived as a stranger camping in tents. Isaac and Jacob did the same, living under the same promise. Abraham did it by keeping his eye on an unseen city with real, eternal foundations—the City designed and built by God.

By faith, barren Sarah was able to become pregnant, old woman as she was at the time, because she believed the One who made a promise would do what he said. That's how it happened that from one man's dead and shriveled loins there are now people numbering into the millions. (vv 8-12 MSG)

God calls into being what is from what is not. Abraham believed God is able to do what God promises. And that faith, as the Apostle Paul so famously declares, was reckoned to him as righteousness. (cf Ro 4:20-22 NRSV)

This is written for you and me as well. We are the sons and daughters of Abraham by faith. So, our trust and love of God is counted to us as righteousness. If God can raise Jesus handed over to death on a cross for our sins, He can surely make us right (that is, justify us before the requirement of the Law) by the resurrection of that same Jesus.

How does this extreme faithfulness impact our lives here and now? The faithfulness of God shapes our view of the universe, the world and ourselves. See, Jesus' disciples did not want to acknowledge that the worst possible news could

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lead to the best possible outcome. Sometimes in our struggles we just can't accept what looks like a complete failure – a complete loss. In this scene first, we learn the character of God. “I will make My covenant between Me and you..” says the Lord. “I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make a multitude of nations of you...I will establish my covenant between Me and you, and your offspring after you.” God sovereignly declares His covenant. Abram left behind the gods he had worshiped in the city of Ur. He left his kin, the culture he had known, the business and the associations he had enjoyed. Relationship with El Shaddai was more valuable. Learn how God deals with His beloved. You are His beloved – the beloved of the one true God.

The second simple but profound thing we learn here is that our faithfulness exists only by God's faithfulness to us. We are not able to believe by our own spiritual effort. The only true action we can take is to bear witness – to express in word and action – our dependence upon God's creation, reconciliation and redemption. God has brought this about as the generations have unfolded and multiplied – until at just the right moment – the only begotten Son of God entered flesh. Jesus is the living expression of God's freedom and self-determination to bring about this reconciliation on God's terms. He did it for love.

This is by all definitions a covenant of God's grace. Grace that goes before (prevenient), grace that makes us right with God's holy self, justifying us before the Law. Grace that enters our hearts by faith and imparts Christ's holiness (sanctifying). Holiness is God's – not ours.

This season of Lent is when we allow the Holy Spirit to come in and say, “So, how is it going? Ready to do a little spring cleaning in there? What kingdom changes are you ready for? Will you renew this everlasting covenant today? Will you put all you are and all you have on the line for a sure thing? Amen.