

Sunday, February 25, 2018
Second Sunday in Lent (Year B)

Genesis 17.1-7, 15-16; Romans 4.13-25; Mark 8.31-38

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During the season of Lent, we make promises to ourselves – and to God – that we are going to do certain things as Lenten devotions. That we are going to pray more. That we are going to give some additional money, maybe even some of our time, to a worthwhile cause. That we might even fast on occasion. Or we promise that we are not going to do certain things. Maybe we're not going to eat meat. Or maybe we're not going to drink alcohol or caffeine. Or maybe we're not going to eat chocolate (heresy!). Or maybe we're not going to engage in social media. Those acts we take on, those things that we are determined to give up, are promises to God. They are meant to be signs of our devotion to God. But what about God's promises to us? Even as we are making promises to God, does God make promises to us in return? And if so, how do we respond to those promises?

The readings for today focus on God's promises, be they stated directly or merely implied through an action or a person. These readings challenge us to live in radical faith in God's promises.

We start with the second monumental promise God makes to humanity. The first you heard about last week – how after the flood God said to Noah, "I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants . . . and with every living creature . . . that never again shall . . . there be a flood to destroy the earth" (Gen 9.9-11), with the rainbow as a sign of that covenant. What we hear today in Genesis takes God's promises to a whole new level. God comes to Abram, an old man of 99 years; and his wife Sarai, barren. God seeks to establish another covenant with humanity. This time through Abram and Sarai. "Walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous . . . You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will establish . . . an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you." (Gen 17.1b-4, 7).

To live into this promise, Abram and Sarai are merely asked to trust God. Fantastical though the promise may seem, they are called to give up control of their destiny and to trust. They are called to leave behind the future they had envisioned for themselves – old, barren, past the point of even hoping that things might change. They are called to live into a new future – one full of hope, of newness, of potential, of new life. And they are given new names to indicate their change of identity and destiny. As one commentary observes, "This covenant opens an entirely new future to Abraham and Sarah that seems impossible for an aged man and his barren wife. But the promises of God are worked out in ways unimaginable to humans" (Synthesis, February 25, 2018).

This covenant between God and Abraham and Sarah is foundational to who the Jewish people are. It is this covenant that kept them together and going throughout their turbulent history. Through trials in Egypt. Through wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. Through political upheaval and the establishment of the unified kingdom of Israel

and Judah. Through the Exile and subsequent return home. And into the time of Roman occupation.

Enter a new promise, a new covenant in the form of Jesus. In today's Gospel, Jesus prepares his disciples for receiving the radical faith necessary to live into that promise. Immediately before this passage, Peter confesses "You are the Messiah" (Mk 8.29). In response, Jesus issues the first of three revelations of what is to become of him – "That the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (Mk 8.31). To which Peter pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him. "How can you say such a thing? I've just said that you are the Messiah, and you agreed. And now you're talking nonsense about suffering and death and being raised from the dead? What is wrong with you?"

Does Peter have faith in Jesus – in the Messiah that Jesus reveals himself to be?

Jesus then rebukes Peter, saying "get behind me, Satan!" (Mk 8.33). When Jesus says this, he is not implying that Peter is evil for not wanting to believe what Jesus says. Rather, Jesus is using the ancient Hebrew understanding of "satan" – to be an adversary, one who obstructs or opposes. And he is likely also calling to mind his experience in the wilderness about three years before, where Jesus encountered the real Satan, who sought to tempt him with earthly wealth and power, to entice him turn away from his divine mission. The mission that Jesus has just revealed to his disciples. But even more, in saying "get behind me," Jesus is telling Peter that he needs to get behind him, to support him, in what is to come. That Peter needs to get behind him and follow him, on the journey he is about to make.

Peter is unable to see the big picture. "You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (Mk 8.33). Jesus rebukes Peter because Peter has faith in a different vision of who Jesus is. Or rather, of what Peter thinks the Messiah should be like. This raises the question as to whether Peter has the courage to believe in, to follow, the Jesus presented before him as opposed to the Messiah Peter wants to actually believe in.

Jesus then proceeds to tell Peter and the rest of the crowd "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (Mk 8.34-35). He is trying to let them know that following him leads not to death – as he will ultimately have to face – but to life. He is calling his disciples to radical faith even as he prepares them for the eventuality of his own Passion. That his Passion is necessary for them to achieve the new life that is the promise of the Messiah. That they are to trust that he will provide the liberation that has long been anticipated with the coming of the Messiah. That he will provide that liberation, just not in the way that they have been taught to expect. Rather, liberation will come through the cross.

Peter's response to Jesus' revelation indicates that he does not yet understand the way of the cross that Jesus will travel – what it truly means for Jesus to be the Messiah. Peter

wasn't expecting death to usher in the new life of which Jesus had been speaking, nor that this life of discipleship would involve so much giving up of control.

Of course, we know that in time, after some fits and starts – including even denying Jesus – Peter does come to see the truth of what Jesus had been telling the disciples. That salvation and new life will indeed be theirs. And that salvation and new life will only come through radical faith in Jesus. And in what is to come in Jerusalem.

In Mark's rendering of the Gospel, taking up the cross meant the specter of religious persecution. This passage points to the fact that early Christians were both ready for persecution and awaiting the return of Christ. Following Jesus' death and resurrection, many will come to that radical faith Jesus seeks to instill in his disciples. A radical faith that is instilled and grows, even in the face of persecution. A radical faith that is even taken up by the likes of Paul – a devout Jew steeped in the tradition of the covenant of Abraham, who himself initially persecuted the early followers of Jesus – who came to see the truth of what Jesus offered. A radical faith that is transformational.

In writing to the Church in Rome, Paul is able to lift up God's covenant with Abraham and Sarah as a model for ongoing life in relationship with God. To see this covenant with the Jewish people as extending to the newly formed Christian faith. In today's Epistle reading, Paul presents Abraham as the very model of faith. As the prime example of how one lives into right relationship with God not through obeying the law but through faith in God's promises. That even though Abraham and Sarah were way too old to bear children, they trusted that God would accomplish what he had promised in his covenant. That their faith was "reckoned as righteousness." And that the communities following Jesus Christ are the inheritors of that covenant. That, as Paul writes, "It will 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" (Rom 4.24-25).

What Paul is lifting up to the church in Rome is that while the faithfulness of Abraham and Sarah is important, the more important thing is God's faithfulness. His faithfulness in carrying through with the covenant from the time of Abraham to the present. And even more so, that what truly matters is what God has accomplished through his Son, Jesus Christ, whose death and resurrection provide us with forgiveness of our sins, with salvation, with the promise of eternal life.

Throughout history, God has made some pretty big promises. Promises he fulfilled through Abraham and Sarah. Promises he fulfilled through Jesus Christ. Promises that only came to fruition because of those who dared to step out in radical faith and live into what those promises offered.

For Abraham, Sarah, and Peter the beginning of seeking to follow God meant stepping into an uncertain future of God's own making. A future that was quite different from what they imagined it to be. A future that could only be entered by giving up control and trusting in the One who bid them to follow.

For Abraham and Sarah, it brought unexpected grace. It brought hope and new life. It brought a son who would be the first not only of a new and unexpected line of descendants, but the founder of nations, leading to a whole new people, a whole new religion. For Peter, it brought unexpected opportunities and growth in faith. It brought the opportunity to bridge theological and doctrinal divides. It allowed him to become the foundation for an institution that would give rise to the largest and greatest religion the world has ever seen.

God's promises, which lead to new and abundant life, are indeed worked out in ways unimaginable to us humans. All he asks of us is that we give up a little control and trust in what he is doing. What might it mean if we, in our faith journeys, have the courage to live into the radical faith of Abraham, Sarah, and Peter? Imagine the possibilities.