

The Second Sunday of Lent

February 28, 2021

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Mark 8: 31-38

Grace and peace to you from God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

Father Michael Renninger learned early on in his ministry the importance of visiting the homebound and those in hospitals or nursing facilities. There was one woman who stood out in my mind. Almost every time he went to visit, her daughter was visiting with her too. So, the three of them would chat, then pray together, share a passage of scripture, and be nourished by Holy Communion. When it came time for him to leave, the older woman would grab him by the hand and say with all seriousness: "Promise me you will come back." Then she'd squeeze my hand and repeat, "Promise me." And he's promise. Her daughter received the same message. Her mother would grab her hand and say: "Promise you'll come back. Do you promise?" She, too, would promise and give her a hug and kiss.

Her daughter later told the priest why her mother was so insistent on this promise. Her husband had been killed in World War II. His body was found far from his unit. Somehow, he'd gotten separated from his fellow soldiers. And his wife, who was now elderly, was always haunted by the thought that her husband had died alone, isolated. Now she was frightened of the same thing. So she was insistent: "Promise me you will come back."

Years later, dementia had robbed this woman of her memories. The day before she died, Father Renninger went to her room, and led her family in prayer. The older woman didn't seem to recognize any of them. But as her daughter leaned over to give her mother a kiss, the look of recognition came across her face. And then she declared: "You came back, just like you promised!" Such joy in a promise made, and a promise kept. Our God is a promise maker, and a promise keeper. And that can become the source of our joy¹ and confidence in good and bad times... when the promise seems right on track or when you doubt it will ever be unfulfilled.

The God who made an everlasting promise to Noah, also made an everlasting covenant with Abram and Sarai. Back in the 12th chapter of Genesis, God spoke to a 75 year-old Abram, telling him to pack up his wife, family and possessions to follow God away from his home. He promises that this elder, childless couple three things. They will become parents to a nation of countless descendants. They will have their own homeland. God will bless them so they can be a blessing, a way for the world to know and return to the one true God. Courageously Abram and Sarah set out to a new life lived in God's promise.

When we catch up with them in today's reading, they are 24 years older and still no child. God has regularly renewed his promise. When they are doubtful, impatient or try suggesting an alternate plan, they are asking, "Do you promise?" God repeats the promise, vowing it will be fulfilled. "I promise. I really promise." In this instance God announces Abram, meaning "exalted father", is now to be known as Abraham, "father of a multitude." Sarai is now to be Sarah, "princess." Trust me. I promise. I really promise." A year later, Sarah has a son that is named Isaac. Isaac and Rebecca would have two sons, Esau and Jacob. Jacob would have 12 sons, whose descendants would become the 12 tribes of Israel — led out of slavery in Egypt, through the wilderness and delivered to Canaan, a land they would possess. God keeps promises. God is steadfast and faithful — though it may not always be so easy to see.

When Sarah died, Abraham sought a cave where he could bury her and his descendants. They were resident aliens in the area of Canaan controlled by the Hittites. Abraham had to wheel and deal for the cave, paying a very hefty price for an attached field. When Abraham died he had one son and a small patch of land in someone else's country. Multitude of descendants who would have their own homeland and be blessed to be a blessing? At his death, the promise was not yet completely fulfilled. There was a start of a family of descendants. He had a foothold and a claim in the land of promise. God's promise to Abraham and Sarah is not unfulfilled. It was just getting started. Much later, St. Paul would lift up Abraham as an example of one who had great faith as he ultimately put his life in God's hands and God's promise, even when it was not going as he dreamed or imagined.

Trusting God even when it does not go as we imagine or wish. That is the crossroads Jesus and his disciples are at in today's gospel. Jesus has come to an epiphany ---- his ministry will lead to rejection, death and resurrection. It must not have been an easy thing for Jesus to accept. "I'm doing as you asked. I going where you send me. I'm saying what you taught me.... and it's going to go to a violent death?" It is NOT that Jesus' mission *is* to suffer and be crucified. It's that he will suffer and die because this healing, redeeming mission of God will be violently rejected by earthly powers. Jesus has chosen to persevere, to trust God, to continue in this life-giving mission, and not turn away even to spare his own life or suffering.

When he announces this to his disciples, they don't want to hear it or believe it. That's not what happens to a Messiah, a king. If that wasn't enough of a shock, Jesus tells those disciples and those who might be thinking of following him, that they too will face rejection, hardships, arrest and possible execution. Again, following Jesus does NOT mean you are looking to suffer and be martyred. But Jesus wants them, and us, to know

that when you choose to live like Jesus ----- healing, feeding, freeing, seeking the lost, accepting the rejected, working so that every person has “enough” ---you will upset the status quo and those who benefit from the way it is and there will trouble. You will have to make choices that require sacrifice and there will be suffering. And it may not seem like God’s kingdom is winning and God’s promise of a new way of life is getting any traction.

Like Abraham and Sarah who didn’t always seem to be fully convinced that God was going to fulfill God’s promises, those first disciples could not see how a cross was going to bring God’s promised blessings and new world about. In this case, maybe they couldn’t get past all the terrible to hear the promised outcome. “[It is necessary for] the Son of Man [to] undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priest, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” Resurrection. New and eternal life would rise out of that painful, awful mess at the cross.

When we look at the cross and then look at the empty tomb three days later, God has shown us a promise. Suffering and death has been overridden by God’s power and life. This is what God wants. God says, “all that causes suffering, all that demeans or diminishes life, I want to transform into everlasting peace, healing, justice, unity, love. This is a glimpse of where everything is moving. Trust it. Trust me.” In Jesus we are reminded that light and shadow, cross and resurrection, defeat and triumph are all mixed together in the daily lives of the followers of Jesus, even as they were mixed in the life of Jesus on earth. The Christian life is not all sweetness and light, pleasure and joy but it is also not all pain, suffering and disappointment. Until we enter the longer side of eternity where there are no more crosses, tears or disappointments, we have the continuing challenge of keeping the faithful tension between cross and resurrection, the struggles and the glory.²

Today we remember the promises God made and kept to Sarah and Abraham. It took longer than they wanted. They did not live to see it all come together. Today, there may be those who come to worship asking, “Are you there, Lord? Do you promise the suffering and cross will not win, Lord?” The crucified and risen Jesus, promises to walk with us, promises to help us carry the burdens or suffering we face when we live as he taught us.... Jesus promises we too will step out of the tomb of darkness and sorrow into the newness of life restored, on this and the longer side of eternity. In the Word of God, in the bread and wine and the love of a church, God says, “You can trust me. I promise. I really promise.” Amen.

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ENDNOTES

1. Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III, "The Establishment of a Covenant People: The Promises of God (The Life of Abraham) (18) Abraham the Stranger "May 23, 1999 as posted at <https://rts.edu/resources>

2. This paragraph adapted from William Willimon's article on the gospel text, "Rethinking God, Cross and Resurrection" in Pulpit Resource January - March 2012