

PASTOR GWEN'S SERMON  
 2<sup>ND</sup> SUNDAY IN LENT  
 "THE FAITH OF ABRAHAM"  
 SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2024

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. **AMEN!**

Last Sunday when Bishop Laurie was here, she spoke of covenants. Actually, covenant is not a word we use often anymore. If you look in the dictionary, you see that covenant has a theological meaning: it is an agreement that brings about a relationship of commitment between God and His people to do or not to do something specified. The Bishop spoke of the rainbow in the sky reminding us of the promise that God will never again wipe out all life from the earth. So, it was a promise that God would never again send a 40-day flood as He did in the days of Noah.

But just as God made a covenant with Noah, he too made covenants with many of the important figures in the history of the Israelites like Abraham, Moses, and David. Today's scripture text from Genesis is another covenant. It is the one that God made with Abraham or Abram. It is the second covenant in this year's Lenten readings. This covenant was God's promise to Abram and Sarai, that they would be the ancestors of all nations. This covenant is everlasting. All who are born to Abraham's line will belong to God and He will be their God forever.

The story of Abraham is a wonderful one that stirs emotions in all of us, I think, in one way or another, but especially to the older generation. But will get to that in a minute. I first want to say that it is an important story because Abraham is the father of all nations, not just an interesting story, but one we need to know. After all, how can we know where we are going if we don't know from where we came? Chapter 17 brings a new story to life for Abram. It has been almost 13 years since he has heard from God. The last encounter Abram had was when Hagar bore Abram a son named Ishmael. Imagine that thirteen years without hearing from God. Talk about your prayers not being answered quickly!!

For years, God had promised Abram that he would be a great nation. God repeated that over and over again to Abram. And he and Sarai waited and waited. Nothing happened. Sarai was not able to give him a son, so Abram takes steps, to help out God and have an heir. Even though God continued to promise that his descendants would be more numerous than the stars in the sky. And since custom told them that a man could have a child by a servant and include the child in his household, Abram thought he would help God out and have a child that way. As I mentioned before, Abram did have a son by his wife's handmaiden, Hagar. His name was Ishmael.

It was after this happened that there was a 13-year absence of God in their lives. As you might imagine there was a bit of unhappiness, jealousy, and unrest between Hagar and Sarai. Wonder if God's silence was a signal to Abram that he had done something God was not pleased with? Did this teach Abram a lesson about circumventing God? But God does come again to Abram, now 99 years old. And here our reading for today begins. God reiterates His promise that Abram and Sarai, together would have a child that would lead to all generations. Emphasis is on both of them, together. For together they are both integral to the fulfillment of God's promise.

And their names are changed, not to protect the innocent, but to clear up any questions as to whom the parents of the world really are. The name Abraham means an ancestor of multitudes and Sarah means princess a name indicating perhaps that a special king will be descended from her. And God names their child, Isaac, which means laughter. Understandable because they were both very old. Sarah was way older than we would expect her able to conceive and have a child. Abraham was 99 and there is something rather funny about a 99-year-old making babies. So, they both had a good chuckle when God told them that they would have a child. Just try to imagine if God told you that you were going to have a very important baby???

In this story, if we look closely there are several promises that God gives to Abraham:

1. I will make my covenant with you.
2. I will multiply you.
3. I will make you fruitful.
4. I will make of you many nations.
5. I will establish my covenant with your descendants.
6. I will give you the land of Canaan.
7. I will be their God.

Think with me for a minute. God did fulfill all 7 of His promises to Abraham and Sarah. However, Abraham did not see the fulfillment of all of them. He saw only one son, Isaac. But it was Isaac that fathered Jacob who was the father of 12 sons who became the heads of the 12 tribes of Israel. And it was God who cared for Israel throughout the ages.

Here you might ask why is any of this important? Why is this covenant important? It is so important that Paul refers to the faith of Abraham in our Romans reading this morning. Abraham is a model of faith for his Jewish readers. Abraham did not become the ancestor of all of Israel because of a perfect life, but rather because he was responsive to God's promises. Abraham was righteous before God, and for Paul, righteousness is a matter of faith, not law. After all, it was a hard concept for the Israelites to understand since they lived a long time thinking that being right with God is found in keeping the law, rather than having faith in God. So, Paul uses Abraham's faith as an example that God brings life into being where there was no life.

And God brings us new life as well in the waters of baptism, where faith is given to us so we too can believe in the promises of God. It is through the life of faith that God brings us an inheritance, the eternal promise of new life. This comes as a gift of God who sacrificed his only Son on the cross for us all. God's promises always come true as we will have new life in heaven someday.

Is suspect that when some of your parents brought you to the baptismal font, you were christened with a new name. This is especially true for those of you that come from the Roman Catholic tradition. Some of you got confirmation names when we were old enough to affirm our baptism and

confess to our faith in Jesus. These new names were a symbol of the covenant that God had with Abraham. Another thing was the circumcision factor that set apart those who fell under the Abrahamic covenant. However, the most important thing to note is that with this covenant it is all God's work. Note that all of those 7 promises I mentioned all begin with the words, "I will". This is all God's promise to us. We have nothing to do with it but believe it.

And we believe that the same is true in our sacrament of Holy Baptism. It is God at work in that covenant. He places the Holy Spirit in our hearts as we are call, named, and marked with the cross of Christ forever. It is God working in those waters that ultimately is important. As He comes to us in that water, we are given a promise, that if we believe we will have forgiveness of all your sins, abundant life on earth, and eternal life in heaven someday. We simply need to believe in that promise for it to come true. God has promised to be our God through our ancestor Abraham. He will never leave us. He will be with us until eternity. All we need to do is have faith, the simple faith of Abraham.

And our Gospel lesson from Mark today, reiterates that fact. Jesus tells Peter to not question Him, and even goes so far as to call Peter "Satan". Peter has his mind on earthly things and not on Godly things. Jesus needs them to think of Kingdom things. His death and resurrection lie ahead and there is no keeping him around even for more training.

It is soon time for them to understand what it means to take up their crosses and follow him. They need to have faith that they are following the one sent by God to bring them salvation in the life to come. This is what Jesus came to earth to do for God's people. You can only save your life by living it, giving it over to Jesus. And if you do that, God will save you. Sounds very simple doesn't it. But yet the people don't yet understand. And even today, many people don't yet acknowledge what our loving God has done for us. Even when we have the advantage of knowing the whole story. We know full well since God's plan has been revealed to us in Christ Jesus. And then comes the big question to those who do not yet comprehend God's amazing grace: "For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"

I know you have heard that line quoted before many times. In fact, our ladies' book club years ago read a book called, If I Gained the World. It is a delightful book by Linda Nichol. It was a wonderful story about how one has to make a choice to follow Christ, to give up one life to live for another, to live for Jesus. And yes, we all have that same choice today. So, what will you choose? I know what I will choose!

Knowing the Abrahamic Covenant, and that God will always be our God, we still need to choose to have faith. We need to choose faith in our God of the New Testament who sent His only Son to earth, to walk among us and carry his cross up a hill to his death, a brutal death mind you. Such atonement for all our sins was real. And so is the promise of eternal life yet to come. This covenant will never be broken, and we can have certain faith that it will come true for all believers. This is God's covenant with us. So, praise be to God who keeps his promises as we have faith that these covenants will be eternal. **AMEN**