

Sermon – “Winter Promises”

Sunday, February 28, 2021

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

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Our first reading is part of the ancient story of Abram, the patriarch with whom God’s covenant was made promising the people and land of Israel, centuries before they would come to possess the land, and before the people even existed—they would all come from this one couple. Abram is renamed Abraham, father of many nations, and Sarai is renamed Sarah, as a part of marking the promise, one which surely seemed outlandish given their ages at the time. Hear now God’s word from Genesis 17, verses 1 through 7 and 15 to 16.

*<sup>1</sup>When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. <sup>2</sup>And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.”*

*<sup>3</sup>Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, <sup>4</sup>“As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. <sup>5</sup>No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. <sup>6</sup>I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. <sup>7</sup>I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.”*

*<sup>15</sup>God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. <sup>16</sup>I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”*

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Our second reading comes from the Gospel of Mark, from in the midst of a series of traveling miracles and teachings which culminates shortly after this passage with the Transfiguration on the mountaintop. Here, he makes everyone very uncomfortable. Listen to God’s Word as recorded in Mark chapter 8, verses 31 through 38.

*<sup>31</sup>Then he began to teach them 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. <sup>32</sup>He said all this quite openly.*

*And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.*

*<sup>33</sup>But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”*

*<sup>34</sup>He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup>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. <sup>36</sup>For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? <sup>37</sup>Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? <sup>38</sup>Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”*

Whenever a passage begins with a word such as “then,” as it does today, it is worth looking back to see what came just before, linked together by the author as a continuous flow of events.

“Then he began to teach them,” Mark’s Gospel tells us, “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. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.”<sup>1</sup>

We find ourselves directly in deep and heavy from the start here. Suffering, rejection, death, rising after death, and a dispute between disciple and teacher. So if that is what happened “then,” what happened before?

Let us look back a few sentences before the start of today’s reading. Here is what we find in the story immediately prior to this one: “Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that I am?’ And they answered him, ‘John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.’ He asked them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Messiah.’ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.”<sup>2</sup>

“Then,” it tells us, he began to teach them about all that suffering and death and was rebuked by Peter for it.

So what came before proves here to make this whole thing quite fascinating, in fact. Peter declares Jesus to be the Messiah, the anointed one of God, and right after this, apparently in the same conversation, Jesus is then telling of his mission and role, and the same Peter grabs ahold of him and starts scolding him and rejecting what he’s saying. It is downright astonishing, the irony of declaring someone to be the actual Messiah, the person you should follow above any other, and then instantly refusing to accept the very first thing that Messiah tries to tell you.

But it’s not just astonishing for us to hear Peter’s behavior; what Jesus has done here is fundamentally quite surprising as well. Jesus is named as Messiah, seems to accept this designation, and then immediately launches into a description of how he is going to get torn to pieces by the world. Heard alone, the first sentence of our Gospel passage is a teaching about what will happen to Jesus, about him having to face rejection, suffering, and so on. But heard in its context, it is a teaching specifically about Jesus *as the Messiah* facing those things, which is to say it is shockingly redefining the narrative and expectations for God’s promised anointed one. The Messiah story is being changed from an assurance of coming triumph into a prophecy of disaster and defeat (along with a confusing bit about “rising again,” whatever that might mean).

No wonder Peter has such a hard time with it. He thought, following Jesus, he was signing on to the winning side. What is the point of a Messiah who loses? Is Peter really to believe that God’s hand-picked general, promised by scripture and finally come, here to save the people, is instead going to suffer at the hands of some of the leaders of those very people, then get killed off? That doesn’t sound like the work of a very powerful God, or of a saving Messiah.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 8:31-32 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

<sup>2</sup> Mark 8:27-30 (*NRSV*).

Maybe you or I would have pulled Jesus aside and started rebuking him, too. In fact, we likely do sometimes. You and I are a part of the same world as Peter, and full of the same human desires. Which means that when you and I read the Gospels, and we encounter some of the crazy things Jesus says, they generate in us the same kind of wide-eyed bewilderment and worry. Have you ever tried wading into some of the harder teachings of Jesus, the challenging ones that don't align with the things we suppose to be true or want to be so, or the harsh ones that give warnings we really don't want to believe are serious? We don't make it but a few words into some of them before all our defenses start getting mobilized, and our skills at spinning things favorably come out in full force.

Think even just about today's passage. Those who wish to follow him have to 1) deny themselves; and 2) follow him to death on their own crosses. And those who are ashamed of him, he'll be ashamed of in return when he comes in glory. These are pretty strong words! Sometimes we just want to say, "Jesus, I love you, but you're a bit over the top. Let's just tone it down a bit." And then in our minds to ourselves, or our Bible study conversations with one another, or our popular Christian books if we are authors, or (I must confess) in our sermons if we're preachers, we jump awfully quickly to something like, "What Jesus *really* meant was..." and fill in the blank with something a bit more tolerable, as if we are politician-Jesus's public relations handlers, nudging him away from the microphone when he goes off-script and trying to backtrack for him and make his words more palatable.

It should not surprise us that we find some of them unpalatable, really. We were born in a fallen world. We have absorbed and internalized what it has told us from the moment of our birth. Which means a good deal of what we recognize as truth is not; and some of what we instinctively reject is actually true. There is no way confused human beings such as ourselves could possibly encounter God incarnate, speaking actual truth, without us finding plenty of it very hard to take and wanting to throw out entire large portions of it.

If you know what I mean, and you want to avoid this, I offer this tip: any time you catch yourself tempted to soften one of Jesus's sayings until it really doesn't say the same thing anymore, go ahead and restate your new version of his teaching, but then finish with, "because I know better than Jesus." Unless you're a complete narcissist, I suspect the utter absurdity of making explicit an implied claim to greater authority than the Son of God will give you a bit of needed pause there. For my part, I find it to be a good practice to take that pause, when I realize I have that urge to rebuke and rewrite Jesus, and just sit and listen uncomfortably instead.

One thing that makes it a little easier is when you realize that it is okay to be uncomfortable. In the Bible studies I lead, I always hope people will eventually trust one another and God enough to go ahead and say out loud, "Boy, I don't really like this part. I don't know how to take it, and I find it distressing." For it is when we acknowledge we don't like it that we can start the honest process of wrestling with it.

Sometimes that wrestling match will eventually change us. Sometimes we legitimately will find we can hear a challenging passage in a more comforting way, but we can only trust that after fairly and honestly taking seriously the hard ways of hearing it, too. Sometimes we will find there are layers of truth in it, and we thought we had something figured out only to come back to it and be challenged anew. And we will likely find ourselves grappling with

certain passages of scripture for the rest of our lives. We are not given complete answers to all things in this lifetime, and I, for one, lean toward letting some questions get marked as unknown or only partially understood, and lean away from finding the easiest answer for each question and immediately settling on that.

But let us come back to our passage from today. What is the challenge here? For Peter, it is a dying Messiah. It makes no sense. For the crowds, surely it was the talk of self-denial, a hard thing to begin with, and taking up crosses, willingly adopting the path of their own death. To them, it must have been bewildering. Remember that they've never heard the story of the Son of God dying on a cross and coming forth, resurrected, on Easter Day. It hasn't happened yet. A cross isn't a symbol of faith to them; it is just a brutal method the Roman government uses to execute people. The question then is this: What possible promise is there in a way of crosses and self-denial? "If any want to become my followers..." he says. Why would you ever follow someone if that is the path he is taking you down?

We, of course, look at this through a post-resurrection lens, so the intellectual part of that is easier for us, but it still is only easy to really *hear it* as it pertains to Jesus, not as it pertains to us. This might be where we have something to learn from Abraham's experience.

"When Abram was ninety-nine years old, The LORD appeared to Abram,"<sup>3</sup> our first reading began. It tells us of God giving a covenant promise, renaming him to "Abraham" and his wife Sarai to "Sarah," telling them that they will be ancestors of nations and kings.<sup>4</sup> It sounds tremendous, divine assurance of blessing—in some ways, sounding opposite of Jesus's promise of encountering rejection and death, which at least superficially does not come across like a blessing at all, just a hard journey of faith. But just as with the Gospel reading, the context of what came before matters here, too.

And here, the context is that this is the *fourth time* Genesis records God's promise as having been given to Abram.<sup>5</sup> The first was when Abram was 75. Which is to say, he was already a pretty old man to be receiving promises of multitudes of offspring, but here at the time of today's reading, twenty-four years later, he is 99 years old, and still his wife has not given birth to a child. There will be yet one more Godly promise after this one,<sup>6</sup> and another entire year will pass from before they lay eyes on their son Isaac.<sup>7</sup>

So perhaps Abram and Sarai's journey of faith hasn't been so easy, either. Traveling twenty-five years through life with only the assurances of having encountered God in five moments across all of those years, each time a meaningful experience but followed by more barrenness; this is a desert journey. There is no way it can have been easy to have faith through all of that; and in fact, we know it was not, because during all that time Abram and Sarai made a number of decisions that seem pretty clearly not to have been rooted in a trust that was never shaken.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 17:1a (NRSV).

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16.

<sup>5</sup> See Genesis 12:1-3, Genesis 13:14-17, and Genesis 15:1-21.

<sup>6</sup> See Genesis 18:1-15.

<sup>7</sup> Isaac is finally born to Sarah and Abraham in Genesis 21:1-7, where Abraham is recorded as being one hundred years old.

<sup>8</sup> See Genesis 12:10-20, where Abram pretends he and Sarai are not married, believing Egyptians will kill him for her, even allowing Sarai to be taken into the house of Pharaoh while in Egypt; and Genesis 20, where he again does the same, not trusting he'll make it through alive. See also Genesis 16, where they decide God's promise needs help and choose to have

I always find promises like the ones by God to Abram over all those years to be somehow both frustratingly hard and reassuring at the same time. None of us likes to hear that faith will be a hard and long path. And yet...each of us already knows, really, that this is so. We've tried it, at least partly, and in between those reassuring visits of the spirit with God it is sometimes a long-lasting struggle. We might go years without seeing clearly why we are doing it at all. Which may partly be why we are given stories like these. If Abram and Sarai were given a promise, and then a day later their son Isaac were born to them, that might be a beautiful story of the power of God, but I think we can often relate better to the Abram and Sarai of today's reading who had gone twenty-four years without seeing the promise come to fruition.

I find myself at about the age at which people often first begin to seriously contemplate the notion that there will come in life—and not too many years away, really—a day when the kinds of hopes that begin with “someday...” grow rapidly less and less realistic. There is a shift, somewhere along the way, from one's life as a thing imagined as mostly being in the future to recognition that most of it has happened already. I cannot speak yet with experiential wisdom about the spiritual journey of living through that re-adjustment of vision and focus, but I do find it very interesting and noteworthy that even the very first promise to Abram came when he was already coming upon the winter years of his life. And Jesus may have been young, but he already knew his life was to be short, and he spoke very directly to his followers about setting aside what they had imagined was ahead and how attachment to this life and the world was something they needed to let go of.

It is almost as if he were saying there is something else, beyond this life, that is more important—some kind of...resurrection, perhaps, into a life eternal. His words are hard on our present hopes—our hopes for this life to be one where all our joys will be found—but by being so, his words also relieve us of the anxiousness and despair of needing all our joys to be found somewhere in what remains of this life.

It is, once we turn ourselves around and look at it from the right angle, a kind of assurance, one that means even in the desert when we haven't seen God for a long time, and even in the winter where we would think it is too late for promises of things to come, God is still there, and is just getting started with us. The Messiah who tells us to throw away our lives on him and come follow him to the cross may be one we want to rebuke, but he is also the one who saves us from the emptiness of the lives we'd prefer, and who calls us to the cross with him because on it—in that very death—our lives are saved.

May God open us up to these things. May God turn our minds so they would be no more set on human things but on divine things instead, being not ashamed of Christ but receiving his words, and more than that, truly hearing them as *promise*, so that we might be given hope and filled up with it even in the midst of all hardship and uncertainty; spring, summer, autumn, and winter. Amen.

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him father a child with her slave girl, something that ultimately and predictably leads to household disaster and the girl being driven out into the wilderness with the child (upon whom God thankfully has mercy and saves from dying in the desert).