

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT | FEBRUARY 25, 2024

GENESIS 17:1-8, 15-26 | PSALM 22:23-31 | ROMANS 4:13-25 | MARK 8:31-38

There used to be this series of CDs called “Now That’s What I Call Music!”¹ A few times per year, this record label would release a new CD with all the biggest hits from the previous season. This was in the pre-Spotify, pre-iTunes, pre-Napster days, so it was a big deal to have all the best music on one disc. In theory, every song was good. And you’d have a CD with no skips.

That’s kind of what our Hebrew Bible readings are like this Lent. We have a series of five of the most important stories from the Hebrew Bible. And what ties all these together is the idea of covenant, a promised relationship between God and God’s people. These stories inform a lot of our ideas about God. If you were here last week, for example, we heard about God’s covenant after the flood with all creation. And that story sets up a lot of our theology about the wide expanse of God’s love for creation and how God’s love is graciously given, not something we earn.

In today’s reading from Genesis, we heard about another fundamental covenant. This time God’s covenant with Abraham and Sarah.² God promises both descendants (“You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations.”) and land (“I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan.”) And while the scope of this covenant isn’t quite as broad as last week’s—which included birds and rocks—this covenant is still really expansive (God promises to “be God to you and to your offspring after you.”)

You get some sense of the covenant’s wide embrace in the diversity of people who claim Abraham as an important figure. For Jews, he’s the first patriarch. For Muslims, he’s considered a prophet. And for Christians, he’s viewed as an archetype—a model—of faith. When St. Paul tries to explain his faith in the risen Christ, the Hebrew Bible character he reaches for isn’t Moses or Joshua or David. It’s Abraham. When we say that we’re descendants of Abraham, most of us aren’t talking about biology. We’re talking about sharing in his faith. And Abraham’s faith, our faith, is all about trust.

We see that right at the beginning of Abraham’s story. When Abraham is first addressed by God, the very first thing that God says is, “Go.” “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” And so Abraham sets off on a new journey and begins this long relationship with God.

If that were us, we might have some questions. *Could I have some additional details? Where is this land? How will we get there? Have I been there before?* And yet, God does not lay out a tightly defined schedule outlining what’s going to be happen every hour of the day. God simply says, “Go.”

There’s something similar going on in today’s gospel reading where Jesus offers an equally commanding but unclear statement. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” We might ask *Follow you where? Who else is going? What time will we get back? Can I drive separately?* And yet, Jesus offers us no itinerary. Just “Follow me.”

That’s hard for us. We struggle with uncertainty. We like the idea that there is a plan and a process and order. If we’re going to set off on a journey, we don’t just want to know where we’ll end up. We want to know what’s going to happen at every step along the way.

¹ It turns out they’re still making these and are up to volume 89 in the US and 116 in the UK.

² Of course, they are Abram and Sarai when all this starts, but I’m not going to flip between names all the time.

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There are some Christian traditions that emphasize this in their theology as well.³ They suggest that God has a well-worked out, detailed story for our lives. That from the moment you are born, there's a divinely inspired plan in place for you. And the way to find meaning and purpose in your life is to make the right choices so you can stay on track with the storybook script God wrote for you.

If that's the way you view life, that there is one pre-ordained positive outcome and you have to make the right choices to get there, you'll probably spend a lot of your life afraid that you might make the wrong choice or regretting that you've already gone off track.

This is not how St. Mark and the authors of Genesis talk about life. And it's also not how they talk about faith. You see that toward the end of today's Old Testament reading when God promises Abraham "to be God *for you* and for your descendants." Which means God promises to be God *for us*.⁴ God does not promise us a roadmap of where we should turn at every fork in the road of life. Instead, God promises to be present with us.

In other words, life in relationship with God is not the prize you get at the end if you make all the right choices. Life in relationship with God is the foundation of our lives.

Which is good. Because these open-ended invitations—"Go" and "Follow me"—they require stepping into an unknown future. God gives us freedom to choose, and we have to make our reverent best guess.⁵ There is no obvious next step. There is no finely tuned plan. There is no teacher's edition of the book of life that has all the answers in the back. Not everything happens for a reason. Sometimes things just happen. Life is contingency.⁶ And so stepping into the future like Abraham, Sarah, and Jesus's disciples did takes courage.⁷

A number of years ago, we had a family in the congregation who was going through a traumatic incident. And as many of you know, when something like that happens I try to offer some space for us to be in conversation so that you have a space to talk if it raises some issues from your own life. And I was chatting with someone, and they said, "You know, it really takes a lot of courage." They were talking about this specific situation, but we might apply that to life in general.

It takes a lot of courage to live. It takes a lot of courage to love. It takes a lot of courage to be vulnerable. To take responsibility. To get it wrong. To own up to our mistakes. To be in relationships. To serve others. It takes a lot of courage to follow Jesus in the way of the cross and resurrection.

But it's God's abiding presence with us, God's promise to be God *for us*, that gives us the faith to go on loving, living, and serving together even when we don't know what tomorrow will bring, we don't know what our efforts will accomplish, and we don't know what our love will bear. Trusting that because Jesus knows our fears and anxieties, our trepidation and nervousness, we are free to follow him in the way of his cross and resurrection.

It takes a lot of courage. So God gives us a living and daring faith.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

³ Lutherans and Reformed Christians share a lot in common, but Lutherans typically start from God's graciousness while Reformed theology starts from God's sovereignty.

⁴ This gets picked up in Luther. Notice the connection to communion here. The body of Christ given *for you*.

⁵ One of the reasons why existentialist ideas map well onto Lutheran theology is because of our emphasis on freedom. While the meaning of life is given (participation in the divine life), we have the freedom to choose how we live our vocations.

⁶ Christian Wiman in *My Bright Abyss*. "Contingency. Meaning subject to change, not absolute. Meaning uncertain, as reality, right down to the molecular level, is uncertain."

⁷ Tillich famously puts it this way. "Courage is the self-affirmation of being in spite of the fact of nonbeing."

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