

Second Sunday of Lent B/February 25, 2018

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

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"What Will We Pass On?"

Oh, how I have come to appreciate and love this story of Abraham and Sarah. It seems the older I get the more this story touches me. It's not because of my getting old, and thereby relating more to this old couple. It is this way for many passages in scripture for me. It seems the older I get, and the more I read and revisit these stories in scripture, the more they become embedded in my psyche, they become part of me, and in some metaphorical way we might say they actually have begun to grow on (or in) me. As would be true for the scriptures of any faith tradition that are passed on from generation to generation, they have found a place within me and now, in many ways, inform the person that I am.

We begin to get the story of Abram and Sar'ai in chapter 12 of Genesis. God calls Abram to leave his father's home and to travel to a place he does not know. Along with this call to move, is a *promise*, the making of a *covenant* between God and Abram. Here in today's passage, that covenant is raised again. It is a promise to lead Abram to a land that God will give to him, but also it is a promise to give to Abram and Sar'ai progeny, to make them the ancestors of a multitude of nations.

Of course, this is all fine and good, except for the fact that Sar'ai is barren. She cannot have, or at least has not been able to have children. And there is the issue of age. Abram is 75 when he first sets out on this journey and in today's passage he is 99. We learn later that Sar'ai is about 10 years younger than he is, so she will be 90 years of age when she gives birth. It is no wonder that when God tells Abram that she will soon bear him a son, that Abram falls on his face and laughs. And that later, Sar'ai will also laugh at this idea (though she will deny it when God accuses her of laughing, because she is afraid, and God will say to her, *"No, but you did laugh."*). And then of course, God tells them to name the child Isaac, which means *"he laughs!"* Truly a sign that God has a sense of humor!

But God is very serious about what God is doing here. And there is another part to this covenant that God is making here. It involves the changing of names. God tells Abram, that now, *"No longer shall your name be Abram ("exalted father"), but your name shall be Abraham ("father of a multitude"); for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations."* Likewise, God tells Abraham, *"As for Sar'ai your wife, you shall not call her name Sar'ai, but Sarah ("Princess") shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her; I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."*

And just to be complete, even God's name is changed here. For the first time, God is referred to as *"God Almighty."* As *"El Shaddai"* has been traditionally translated. One scholar (Valerie Bridgeman Davis) suggests another translation: *"God of the Mountains"* perhaps a reference to God as the maker of all creation, or possibly *"God with many breasts"* which sounds like a reference to a fertility god, which would actually be appropriate here, seeing as God is giving the power to conceive to Sarah. But another understanding is that this is the God who is promising to make these two the ancestors of many nations. Thus, this is the God, who gives life and nourishment, not only to this couple and their family, not just of their progeny Israel, but of all nations, all peoples.

Thus the story of the covenant between God and Abraham and Sarah, is a covenant for all people, all of creation. It is the story of a God who is willing to take on a new identity, who promised to be their God, and that they should be God's people. It was this message that was passed down, generation to generation, that God made a covenant, an everlasting covenant to which God would always be faithful, and to which we were called to be faithful as well, to the point of taking on new names, new identities, becoming the people God calls us to be.

Jesus also experienced the call to a new identity. In the story of his baptism, he is called by God, *"my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased."* And at that very moment he is driven by the Spirit, out into the wilderness, to face the devil and temptation, to discover his new identity, as Theologian Frederick Buechner says, *"to ask what it meant to be Jesus."*

In Mark's gospel, Jesus also calls his followers to take on new identities. After Simon Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ (and who in Matthew's gospel is then given a new name), Jesus begins to explain to them the way of the Messiah. Saying *"that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again."*

And we hear in our passage for today, that Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. Peter, and the other disciples, have a different understanding of who and what Messiah is going to be. They have been watching him cure the sick, heal the lame, perform miracles of many kinds, feed thousands with just a few loaves and some fish, teach with authority and argue with and outsmart the religious leaders and the establishment. They have been listening to him, learning from him, admiring him and now see him as the Christ, God's chosen who will come in power and might to overthrow their enemies. And for them that means positions of power and influence, prosperity and security.

But Jesus rebukes Peter, calls him by another name, *"Satan"* and then speaks to 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."*

The call of Christ, is a call to change, a call to let go of the self we thought we were and become, as Luther put it, *"Little Christs."* Not to merely be listeners of his teachings, or admirers of his abilities to heal and perform the miraculous. No, we are called to be *followers* of Christ, to walk in the way that he walked, to suffer as he suffered. To open ourselves, become vulnerable, and willing to go wherever the Spirit of God leads us. To pick up our cross and accept the challenges of those who seek to live in the ways of love, compassion, courage and hope. This is what Christ has passed down to us.

When we look at the world around us, at our own nation and the amount of violence that occurs in our cities and schools, we have to wonder what we are passing on to the next generation. According to the Brady Campaign to End Gun Violence website (bradycampaign.org), every day, **"318 people** in America are shot in murders, assaults, suicides & suicide attempts, unintentional shootings, and police intervention." **46** of those are children. **96 of those die** from those shootings. That means over **35,000 people are dying** from being shot in this country, every year. Compare that with the number of U.S. military and civilian casualties in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria since 2001. In those 16 years, **6,949 have been killed.**

(<https://www.defense.gov/casualty.pdf>). We are killing far more of our own people in our own country each year, than our military has lost in over 16 years of war overseas. We are passing on a culture of violence and war to our future generations.

I can't help but think about the young people of Parkland, Florida, who, by no choice of their own, found themselves surrounded by more of this senseless tragedy and violence. But who have chosen to take up the cause of making change in their world, trying to bring about a better, safer society for themselves and future generations. Through their own pain and suffering, they are finding new identities and new directions in life that they would never have expected to be taking and they are making a difference in their world.

In this season of Lent, we are called to follow in the way of Christ. To willingly enter that wilderness that stands before us, that wilderness that leads to the cross. It is a journey that may involve risk, may involve hardship and suffering, will certainly require our whole selves, our whole lives, and our working together. We are not in this alone. We are but part of those many generations who have received the promise of God, the love of Christ. And it is only in following this way, that we will find *our* new identities, *our* new names as a people ***beloved of God***, called to bring love and peace to our world. This is what we are to pass on. **This is the way of Christ.** Amen.