

SECOND SCRIPTURE READING: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 pg 13 OT

1 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. 2 And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." 3 Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, 4 "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. 5 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. 6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. 7 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.

15 God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. 16 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."

This is the word of the Lord

FIRST SCRIPTURE READING: Romans 4:13-17, 22-25 pg 155 NT

13 For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. 14 If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. 15 For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. 16 For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us)...22

Therefore [Abraham's] faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness." 23 Now the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone, 24 but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, 25 who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

“I Will Be”

How does it stand between us and God? Surely this has been a key question asked through the ages, but it is one WE need be asking ourselves, the second Sunday of Lent. How does it stand between us and God? One commentator says that during the Lenten season, we need not be “heading straight to Easter from the spa or the shopping mall.”¹ Lent is a season of introspection, of truth-telling and honesty about ourselves and our sinfulness, of looking in the mirror and taking a position of frank humility. I like what Mark Twain once said, *“I am reputed to be made in the image of God, but as I look at myself, to tell the truth, I think I’m more of a rough sketch.”*² Sort of funny. Yes, +Lent is a time to examine what the nature of our own covenant with God is like. “How does it stand between us and God?”

Certainly, we might find some comfort in studying the lectionary reading for today, for there we see at the center of it, fellow sinners. Abraham and Sarah have significant flaws. By Genesis 17, we’ve read about Abraham’s fights with his nephew, Lot, about his presenting Sarah to Pharaoh as his sister rather than his wife when he was in a tough spot, about his complicity in mistreating Hagar, Sarah’s slave whom Sarah gave to him in a moment of impatience to have a son, and we read of Abraham’s conspiracy in the plan to abandon Hagar in the desert. Yes, Abraham and Sarah are certified sinners, yet, on the whole the couple has remained in relationship with and faithful to God, as is evident in their following God’s call years before, *“Go from your country and your kinsmen to the land that I will show you.”*

Yet, it was to this flawed but faithful couple that God makes a promise. For them this may have required more trust of God than when God led them out of their homeland. God reiterates a promise made 24 years earlier that even though Abraham is a 99 yo, childless man, he and his elderly wife will be the parents of a vast nation, with many descendants (as many as the stars in the sky), a nation that will then bless all the nations of the world. God even changes their names

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor. *“Homiletical Perspective of Gen 17:1-7,15-16”* in *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: WJKP; 2008), 55.

² Mark Twain. Quoted in Will Willamon. *“Our Best Hope”* <http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/8659/february-25-2018-our-best-hope>. (accessed 2-23-18).

mark the promise. Abram became Abraham meaning father of the multitude and Sarai became Sarah, princess. Kings shall come from her.

Comparing this covenant to the Noadic covenant, this one is not made to all Creation. Instead, it is narrowed in scope. It is a promise to just a couple, but yet it has the same consequence...an open, assured future for the whole world, all the nations. Like the Noadic covenant, this one has a sign associated with it...circumcision, and it is a unilateral, unconditional one. It is solely made at God's initiative, and not on the basis of anything Abraham & Sarah have done, or must do. Will Willamon summarizes well what God says, in essence, to Abraham & Sarah. *"In spite of who you are, or what you have done or not done, I will be your God and you will be my people. Even if you have had a tough time doing good things for me, I'll do a good thing for you. I promise to give you a future—that is, to give you children and then to make of you a great family that will be a blessing to all the families of the earth. I will not leave you but go with you wherever you go. I will be your God and you will be my people."*³

Ultimately, what we see is once again with this covenant is the revelation of God's character. It's all about God. "God is the "awesome, inscrutable divine identity which is thrown in the face of that '99 yrs!"⁴ God is the Almighty! And God prevails over "the human condition"! God is beyond our capacity and limitation. As the old hymn that we've just sung goes, "God "reigns enthroned above, the Ancient of Eternal Days"⁵.

But this covenant also reveals, it gives us a glimpse, of what God is up to. It gives us a glimpse of what God's divine plan is. We see that God intends to be for us. This is called *Dei pro nobis*...God for us. God will not sit back, disappointed that, time after time, we human beings have failed to live up to what we were created to be. God will be with God's people and for God's people". This is what God promised to Abraham, and through Abraham, to Israel, and by extension to the Church in Christ, and through the Church to the world. God keeps

³Will Willamon. "Our Best Hope" <http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/8659/february-25-2018-our-best-hope>. (accessed 2-23-18).

⁴Walter Brueggemann, *Text for Preaching, Yr B.* (Louisville: WJKP; 1993),202.

⁵Moses Maimonides, "Hymn: The God of Abraham Praise"

coming to us no matter what. This is God's plan and this how it stands between God and us. It is the basis of our hope in life, in death, and life beyond death.

As a pastor and when I was a chaplain, I have been asked many times the question, "What happens when we die?" It's a question that most all of us likely have considered, or will. And God's promise, here in Genesis through the covenant with Abraham, sheds light on it. The God who comes to us before we come to God, the God who keeps coming despite our sin, the God whose primary intent is to be with us and for us, WILL come to us even in death (pause). What did the father of the prodigal son say to his other son? "*Son, you are always with me, and ALL that is mine is yours.*" (Lk 15) What did Jesus say to his disciples when he visited them after his resurrection? "*I go and prepare a place for you, and I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also....Because I live, you also will live*" (Jn 14) And what did John say in the Revelation of the Christ?, *And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them; they will be God's people, and God will be with them (Rev 21)* The Abrahamic covenant, which reveals to us the character of our mighty God, also reveals God's plan, to hold us in life, and in life after death.

Now, there is something else this covenant does, this beautiful covenant. It gives us our purpose. In vs 1 of our reading, God tells Abram to "*walk before me, and be blameless.*" This is best translated to mean, "*Present yourself, and be devoted*". You see, God promises Godself to us, "*I will be your God*", but God also claims us, "*You will be my people.*" And being God's people means that we, by definition, need live to reflect God in the world, as more than rough sketches. We, the Church, are gathered not as the world gathers, in class, race, status, but as people who live out the Promise. We are those through whom all the nations are blessed! Our response needs to be for others! (*et alli*) We're to come and keep coming to others as does Jesus to us with a forgiving **unconditional** grace, we're to **accompany** and care for others who are **abandoned** or alone, we're to bring the joy of Christian hope to those whose lives are empty

and **barren**, we're to bring to tired **old** lives the excitement of a new future in Christ. (*pause*)

One commentator said so beautifully that this covenant is “*a living thing, as surely as if it had a beating heart and blood flowing in its veins*”.⁶ (*repeat*) Friends, the life of the covenant is lived through us and it is a rich, wonderful privilege to present ourselves and be devoted in it.

So, on the 2nd Sunday in Lent, we have considered how it stands between God and US!. *Dei pro nobis*. But we need ask ourselves, “*How does it stand between US and God?*” What is the nature of our own covenant with God? If, friends, we were to make a promise to the God who says, “I will be” , what would each of us say?... “I will be....more forgiving, more attentive, more compassionate, more honest, more generous, more kind, more patient, more devoted, more inclusive, more hopeful, more prayerful, more trusting, more grateful? You know, there is great joy in letting go of our illusions about ourselves. Let's spend some time looking in the mirror and taking a position of frank humility during these 40 days, and let's then come to the One who prevails over the human condition and who comes to us, in life, in death and in the life after. Come to the One who **will be** with us and for us forever. Amen

⁶ Barbara Brown Taylor. “*The Late Bloomer*” In: *Gospel Medicine* (Boston: Cowley Pub; 1995), 41.