
LENTEN STUDIES

YEAR B

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SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR B

Genesis 17.1–7, 15–16; Psalm 22.24–32; Romans 4.13–25; Mark 8.31–38.

In this second week of Lent Abraham and Jesus are central to our journey. Last week God's covenant with Noah started us on our journey. This week God's covenant with Abraham and Sarah continues the journey. Keep in mind the common theme.

Read on.

Genesis 17.1–7, 15–16

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

God said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah 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 give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.'

Put yourself in the shoes of Abraham or Sarah (or both). Read these promises from God made to you and test your reaction to them. Note down some of those reactions of thought and feeling. What do you make of them?

The back story is that God has called Abraham and Sarah (I'm using their later names); Genesis 12.1–3 tells that story and this family has already started its journey with God from what is today south eastern Turkey down into Egypt and back into southern Canaan and had no little adventure along the way (Sodom and Gomorrah for instance). This God is a very disturbing presence and partner.

But Abraham and Sarah have been promised an heir and heirs require land. They have neither. Still. They have waited patiently. Still nothing.

Now God comes up with a plan. This plan starts with a covenant. We have already seen that God make the same arrangement with Noah (remember the promise and the rainbow?). We often think of a covenant as an agreement that is transactional. You rub my back I rub yours. Except I can't rub God's back. In fact I don't have much I can do a transaction with. I can't think of anything really. Can you?

So when God makes a covenant he makes the promises and he asks us to trust the promises and live life that way. No guarantees, just a promise. No rules, just living life now in the promise of the future. Can you see what a risky business this is? Reflect on the way you live now in the light God's promises. How do you view risk?

Notice that covenant with Abraham has differences with the covenant with Noah. Can you spot them? What are the underlying principles?

What strikes me is "Never again" (Noah) becomes the promise to create a people whose sole rationale is to bring blessing to all the nations. When God first called Abraham and Sarah that was the promise. God calls them to become a nation that is blessed that will then be a blessing to others; "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12.1–3). The cosmic journey in Noah becomes the journey in history with Abraham and Sarah where spiritually and ethically frail,

unbelieving men and women, take a journey with God to bless all the families of the earth. That is plan and the covenant cements it in history. How?

First, God will be God. "I will be their God" (v.7–8). That is critical. It is the purpose of this God to bless all families (including ours) and the called human beings are covenant partners in this. Here is the hidden and often forgotten root, not only of Israel, but also of the church. God is not ashamed to use fickle and flawed people to partner with him in the great adventure. "Never again" now becomes "I will be their God."

Second, Sarah and Abraham become the new Adam and Eve in history. They will be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1.28) just like Adam and Eve and for the same purpose; to be the first fruit of a new creation. Only this time the human capacity to bring ruin upon itself lies in wait. So God's choice is fraught with danger and the risk of failure.

Third, all the necessities will come; an heir, land, governance. The adventure begins.

What do think of God's risk-taking? What has been your story in the adventure? Reflect on the risks God has taken with us and the risks we have taken in this adventure.

Have you worked out what the covenant offers to Abraham and Sarah that can sustain them when everything goes pear-shaped? E.g. no heir, no land or the land taken away, the kingship collapses, the temple burnt to the ground.

Here are some ideas to mull over.

The covenant offers the gift of hope.

The covenant offers the gift of an eternal identity.

The covenant offers the possibility of belonging and community.

The covenant offers a clear and certain vocation.

Can you find those elements? How can these be a spiritual foundation for our adventure?

Psalm 22.24–31: This prayer for help we treasure deeply for its use by Jesus on the cross; “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.” The poet goes on to poignantly express forsakenness by God and helplessness in the face of repudiation, violence and death.

We are going to respond to the story of Abraham and Sarah with the second part of the poem because it expresses praise and celebration for the God who rescues the despised. Remember that Jesus prayed this prayer and in it we see something of his soul in worship and praise.

Read on in prayer.

Psalm 22.24–31

For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him.

From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay
before those who fear him.

The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the LORD. May your hearts live for ever!

All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD;
and all the families of the nations shall worship before him.

For dominion belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations.

To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before him shall
bow all who go down to the dust,
and I shall live for him.

Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord,

and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.

What ways can you see to pray this prayer in response to God's covenant making with Abraham and Sarah and make it your own?

This prayer of celebration and praise is place firmly in the community. And not any community but a community with special names; brothers and sisters (22), those who fear (revere) him alone, those who seek the Lord, lowly, poor and afflicted. None of this is national or familial, tribal or kin. Instead it centres on "I will be your God."

The poem celebrates hope. Find all the future tenses in the passage. The future is full of God's promise. There is hope for the poor, the afflicted, the seeker and the nations. Deliverance and redemption abounds for the world.

There is an assured vocation. Praise and proclamation of God's boundless love for his creation, for the nations is covenant partnering with the God who rules the world and to whom it belongs. We do not partner a usurper. Our lives represent the God who blesses.

This leads into our eternal identity. As Christians we think of that in terms of serving the Living Christ. In Abraham and Sarah's terms it is as covenant partners with the God who blesses the world and acts to restore its health and beauty. They are one and the same story, except we have the privilege of seeing the greater revelation.

The link is found in v.28, "For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations." Jesus says the Kingdom of God is near. God is always on the risky adventure for His creation's sake.

Pray the psalm again as a response to Abraham and Sarah. What does it say to you about your vocation, identity hope and community?

We move on to a passage from St Paul that links our salvation in Christ to the history of Israel, especially that of Abraham and Sarah. We sometimes think that St Paul speaks only about private, individual salvation in his letters; how I get to heaven. And that is true, sometimes. But it is also true that he ties our Gentile salvation in the Messiah with promises made to Abraham. Paul is expounding how God's promises made to Abraham and Sarah were always intended to include Gentiles as well as Jews. Paul sees God's actions and promises in Israel to be one of a kind with the story of Messiah Jesus.

Read on and see what you think are main points Paul is making.

Romans 4.13–25

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. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise

is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

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, as it is written, ‘I have made you the father of many nations’)—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become ‘the father of many nations’, according to what was said, ‘So numerous shall your descendants be.’ He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith ‘was reckoned to him as righteousness.’

Now the words, ‘it was reckoned to him’, were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

Paul is arguing (throughout the whole chapter) that Abraham’s faith is the sole badge of membership in God’s people. The argument has its complexities so we will stick to the main ideas. To do that look at 13–15 first.

Meditate on the problem that the law poses for the inheritance. Law places us in opposition to God because it shines a light on dark places in Israel (and human life). That is its job. That invokes judgment on ethnic Israel and thus no one can inherit the promises. Thus Torah can’t be the badge of membership of Abraham’s descendants. Faith precedes Law.

Reflect on the faith of Abraham and Sarah. Examine it carefully and write down what it is like. Pray to exercise that trust in the promising, life-giving God. Trust in God’s covenant-keeping justice to bless the whole world becomes the hallmark of Christian faith.

Now, second, let’s look at 16–17.

Who is the father of us all? How might reflection on Abraham’s faith challenge your own ideas of faith?

According to Paul what was the character of the God Abraham trusted? Reflect on “presence”, who gives life to the dead, who “calls into existence the things that do not exist.” What do make of that? How does that contribute to your faith?

Third, read 18–22 in the light of your meditations so far.

Here faith and hope are linked together forever. Trust in the God who promises ridiculous things brings the future into the present. And trust opens the future up, against all odds. Think of the odds here. Stop and assess them. What would you do? The ancients knew as well as you and I do about the effects of time on ageing bodies. And that trust in the God who promises ridiculous things and does them is what constitutes and counts for them as the basis for covenant membership.

If we took this faith seriously what difference would it make to us and our congregation? What is the difference between saying 'I believe God exists' and saying 'I believe like Abraham and Sarah?'

Here is another way of looking at Abraham and Sarah' faith. One day when you have time you can read chapter 1 of Romans where Paul outlines something of the human condition. If you compare this description with the description of Abraham and Sarah's faith you will find it is a counterpoint to that condition.

Did you notice that Abraham takes God as defining all that he is. Worship thus becomes central. Giving God the glory is the only thing to do.

On the hand as Paul sees the human condition as ignoring God. Thus why worship or give glory? With the result they worship the things they make or own, or others they may exalt such as politicians, stars, kin, and the list is endless and the end is always destructive, demeaning of themselves and others.

Now that is a highly contested view in the modern world. It puts to us a proposition, 'Trust us to being progress at every level of human life forever and ever. Amen' Or slink off into that weird little cabal that trusts that God alone raises the dead'. What do you think?

The passage finishes with verses 23–25. Paul makes two points. All this applies directly to us. We become covenant partners with the God who brings the future into the present by exercising Abraham and Sarah's faith. No more, no less.

Further, this time the promise is found what Jesus accomplished in his trusting of the God who raises the dead. The massive human evil that disfigures the world and brings it to its knees is itself brought to its knees in the cross. We know that because the crucified is raised and we are covenant people and covenant partners because of it.

We move from the faith of Abraham and Sarah and our part in that to explore the journey to the cross of him "who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification."

Read on.

Mark 8.31–38

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. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 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.’

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. 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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 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.’

We are at the pivotal point of the Gospel of Mark. We have arrived swiftly because last week we were at the beginning. Along with momentous declaration of his message this story suddenly and alarmingly focusses our attention. Without warning the proclamation, the healings and exorcisms that have accompanied Jesus’ mission to Israel are totally reconfigured. Jesus will be rejected, killed and then rise again.

Whatever was going on in the disciples’ heads it was not the same as in Jesus’. So now is the time for clarity. Jesus’ plain words are clear to us but we need to pay attention to the title he gives himself, “the Son of Man”. This son of man is a figure who appears in Daniel 7. Jesus chooses this well-known biblical figure because he represents Israel, he judges the violent despotic nations, and his rule (kingdom) is indestructible and inexhaustible.

So the nations and their shadowy counterparts in the spiritual creation must get rid of him. They have no alternative if they wish to survive. The rest of the story tells that story. But he must go through with the plan if he is to bring them to heel and heal the world.

How would you feel if you heard this for the first time after a lot of great times on the road? How might you react?

So Peter’s reaction is a simple repudiation of the plan. Don’t be silly.

Jesus’ reaction is alarming. To refuse God’s plan for healing the world is to join the politicians and their shadowy counterparts in keeping the world the way it is; broken, oppressed, without healing and at the whim of the powerful and the noisy. In other words, it is Satanic.

Can you identify with Peter? Feel a bit sorry for him? Do we sometimes need the Holy Spirit to rebuke us? To wake us up? Can we become a bit lazy and self-satisfied?

Discipleship has been a bit of a road trip for the disciples up to this point. But now everything changes. The coming of God's kingdom has its opponents, it is always contested. So being God's covenant partner, part of God's covenant people by Abraham and Sarah's faith, has consequences for it plunges us into the contest. It is a contest about what is really important for human life and the created order, and what makes for true power and glory.

Disciples have to prepare themselves for that contest. The way to do that is described here.

Pick out the key points that Jesus says constitutes being a disciple in the contest for the rule of God's justice and peace. Reflect on them and ask what they might mean for you? What is the central feature of discipleship?

The rest of the story in Mark will reveal more fully what this will mean for us. Jesus says here that he thinks that the defeat of the powers and their human acolytes will take place in his death and resurrection. Jesus is going to restore the world to what God created it to be (not destroy it as some think) and to confront and defeat the powers of death and oppression that contest the world, not by military might which is just another expression of death and oppression, but somehow by his tackling death itself and overcoming it. Nearly as ridiculous as the promises made to Abraham except for one thing, he rose from the dead.

Do you think that the coming of God's rule into our lives means a few minor adjustments to our lifestyle? What do think that coming to Holy Communion, which is centred on our Lord's death and resurrection, requires of us in discipleship.

Abraham and Sarah's journey is now ours. They started it we now walk the way in our own times with their faith and hope to guide us and their frailty and need for forgiveness to encourage us.