

2nd Sunday of Lent

February 28, 2021

Genesis 17:1-7,15-16

“Hard to Believe Promises”

- I. A Hard to Believe Promise.
- II. Hard to Believe What We Are Allowed to See.
- III. The Hard to Believe Promises Fulfilled.

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Genesis 17:1-8, 15-16

Dear Friends in Christ,

If you've been on this earth for awhile, then you've had your share of trials and tears, for some of you much sooner than later in life, but the Lord got you through them. He didn't take all of them away. He got you through them. More than likely, in some of the trials and tears, God revealed the "Why". Sometimes He didn't. The explanation rests in this Word of the Lord through the Apostle Peter: "...if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith...may be found to result in praise and glory and honor through the revelation of Jesus Christ...(for you are) obtaining the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls." (I Pt. 1:6,7,9) And the explanation rests with this Word of the Lord through the writer to the Hebrews: "For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." (Heb. 12:8) He didn't always explain the trials and tears. He got us through them. And He did that because we are His through faith in Christ. Because this place - this earth - is only for a moment. Because He isn't going to let us get rooted here.

And then there's Jesus, making His way to the Cross. We've traveled this hard journey many times. Why did...why does...God do things the way He did and does? The Scriptures speak: "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and inscrutable his ways! (Impossible to always understand)" (Rom. 11:33)

We're looking at *Lessons for Our Journey to Eternal Life*. This Sunday . . .

HARD TO BELIEVE PROMISES

I. A Hard to Believe Promise.

Going back to the fifteenth chapter of Genesis, God promised Abraham a son who would be his heir. Recall that his wife, then called Sarai, frustrated because she had not given birth to a child, said to Abraham, "Behold now, the LORD prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant (Hagar); it may be that I shall obtain children by her..." (Gen 16:2) The account of this birth reads: "And Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram." (Gen. 16:15-16) If you recall the account, the outcome was very unpleasant for everyone. It was designed by Sarai and Abram, not God; a moment of impatience with God and His promise. *A hard to believe promise.* Our text for this morning begins with . . .

When Abram was ninety-nine years old (13 years after Ishmael's birth) the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly." (Gen 17:1-2)

In his commentary on Genesis, John Jeske writes . . .

Thirteen years had passed since Ishmael's birth, years apparently without any further divine revelation to Abram. It had now been twenty-four years since God had first appeared to Abram with the promise that he would be the ancestor of the Savior. Abram was now ninety-nine, Sarai eighty nine. Humanly speaking, every shred of hope they had of ever becoming parents had been swept away. Luther once made the statement: "It's God's way to empty a man first before filling with his blessing." Now God decided that the time had come to make a startling announcement about his covenant. (John C. Jeske, Genesis, CPH, 1991, p.150)

God works in His time and way. He owes no-one any explanation of anything. He moves and works through the sin of this world. Everything He does is fulfilled out of love for the world He so loved; for people such as you and me. God said to Abram . . .

II. Hard to Believe What We Are Allowed to See.

"Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called 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...and kings shall come from you. (vv. 4,5,6b)

God then said to Abraham . . .

"As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai (the meaning is unknown), but Sarah (*princess*) shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her." (vv15-16)

What God said and promised to Abraham threads its way through the Old Testament Scriptures to the opening words of the New Testament Gospel of Matthew: "The book of genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of ..." (vv.1-2a), and then proceeds from there through the list of Old Testament kings, particularly of Judah, the leaders following the kings, all descendents of Abraham as promised, down to the statement, "...and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ." (Mt. 1:16) It's the promised "multitude of nations" leading to the birth of Jesus. But that's not all....

In the fourth chapter of Romans, Paul writes of Abraham's faith, "faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness." (v. 9b) He wasn't circumcised until later, circumcision being a sign of belonging to the Lord. Please listen:

He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised (Abraham had faith in the coming Messiah who would pay for his sins). The purpose was to make him father of all who believe without being circumcised (that is, Gentiles), so that righteousness (sinlessness) would be counted to them as well, and to make him father of the circumcised (Jews) who are not merely circumcised but also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised. (Rom 4:11-12)

And get this: Paul writes in Romans:

For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel (that is, descended according to the flesh), and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring (again, descended according to the flesh), but "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring. (That is, the promise of "...whoever believes has eternal life." Whoever believes is a descendent of Abraham!) (Rom. 9:6b-8)

We are allowed to see what might appear to be a hard to believe promise. But that's not all . . .

III. The Hard to Believe Promises Fulfilled.

Everything promised to Abraham culminates in this journey we always make during Lent; this journey in which God takes on flesh and becomes a descendent of Abraham, of David, of many; becomes our Brother. Our Lord Jesus makes His journey down a road of rejection and hatred because He confronts humans for what they are: fallen, sinful creatures who, by nature, want God on their terms, or don't want Him at all!

The Scriptures, from beginning to end, place before us the map of Christ's journey and a list of hard to believe promises for those who see death as the natural course of life when, in reality, it is a horrible life eating monster. Years ago, journalist Heywood Braun noted that "Nobody talks so constantly about God as those who insist that there is no God." And while I cannot identify the author, this insight says much: "Agnosticism doubts truth. Rationalism questions truth. Infidelity scoffs at truth. Logic dissects truth. Education searches for truth. But Jesus said: 'I am the truth.'"

In spite of how this world sees anything, the promise is still there: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life." (Jn. 3:16) And though our sins are great and many and fully deserving of God's unending wrath, the truth remains firm:

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.
If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. (I Jn. 1:8-10)

In spite of how long we've been on this earth, it's easy to confess that we've been through a lot of trials and tears, but the Lord got us through. He didn't take them away. He got you and me through. He used them so we wouldn't be overly distracted by this world because, as Peter wrote, "(we) are obtaining the outcome of our faith, the salvation of (our) souls." (I Pt. 1:9) God keeps His promises.

Amen.

Pastor Bill Abbott