

Sermon for February 25, 2018 – “Now THAT’S Funny!”

Second Sunday of Lent, Year B – Texts: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Mark 8:31-38

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As we take a look at our first reading you need to be aware that we’ve left out part of the passage. Is this a problem? Well, kind of... You see, the passage contains God’s promise to Abraham, an everlasting promise. Essentially, God promises to be God to Abraham and Abraham’s offspring. What’s omitted (thankfully) from our lectionary is the way that the covenant is to be lived out for Abraham and those that came after him in the Jewish faith. And that would be (ahem) circumcision. To be clear, it’s not that the directive to circumcise becomes a condition of the covenant itself, actually it’s a sign of the relationship. Now, the passage was probably written during the time of exile in Babylon.

In the sixth century before the birth of Christ Israel was devastated by the destruction of their city and its temple. These were the center of life, both political and religious. With both city and temple gone you just **know** the Israelites were wondering “Hey, what happened to the covenant?” “Um, God...are you still there?” So, the Priestly writer reminds them that God **is** still there, that God promised an everlasting covenant, that God promised to always be with them, and that God has faithfully kept that promise. This was a promise to hold on to even in the midst of the darkness of exile. It’s a way of establishing, or better still, **re-establishing** the people’s identity.

First, God appears to Abram and announces God’s presence. Abram falls on his face incredulous at who’s actually speaking to him. And with the covenant, Abram becomes Abraham and Sarai becomes Sarah. The covenant signifies a shift in who they are. God promises that Abram and Sarai will have descendants. And they laughed. Well, of course they laughed. It was ridiculous. Abram and Sarai were old. All logic told them that their childbearing years weren’t just running out but were waaaaay behind them. It just didn’t make sense. But, perhaps not surprisingly, God often doesn’t make sense. And by retelling the covenant, by reminding the people – **repeatedly** – of this everlasting promise, it lives. The covenant lives! This becomes a personal story of God’s faithfulness to the people. The covenant moves into the future tense. It becomes something for which we are waiting and moving toward which makes sense to read it during our season of Lent.

Now, as we know, Abraham and his family never saw it come to fruition. For them, it was enough just to live with the promise. That’s a lesson for all of us with respect to our relationship with God. It then calls us to look at our own covenant between us and God and how we understand all that in terms of our baptism. The sign of that covenant, the reminder of that...that’s the crux. Truthfully, the promise means nothing **without** that relationship, without our entering into relationship with God and living the promise itself. This passage is the story of Abraham’s identity. Abram, which means noble, or exalted father and Sarai, which means princess, become Abraham, the father of many people, and Sarah, mother of nations, or the princess of many. But these aren’t just new names, they are new **identities**. Identities that comes from this established relationship with God. They are new names and new identities bestowed by God. But the reality is this, that they don’t truly come to be until they are **lived out in relationship!** **That** is what it means to be a covenant people.

For Judaism, this is the establishment of their identity as a people. This is where they become the children of Abraham. This where the religious community is defined, more than any Land, more than any Law. Living out that identity is about believing and trusting in this promise that was given through Abraham.

In this season of Lent we, also as covenant people, stop and take a good, long, hard look at our identity, at the way our relationship with God is lived out in our lives. How does it stack up? The promise given Abram when you think about it was at least far-fetched, and on some level downright ludicrous. But then, most of God's promises are! We miss reading the part of this story where Abram fell over laughing. And when he told Sarai, she did the same. Was it nervousness? Disbelief? Or something else that brought laughter? We probably think it a little irreverent. After all, who'd laugh at God? Probably more people than we realize. And, you kind of have to feel sorry for Abraham and Sarah because their son's name, Isaac in Hebrew means "He laughs", would forever be a reminder that they laughed at God! But I have to wonder, does God laugh at us sometimes? I can almost picture God laughing at us the way some parents laugh at their kids, like in all those You Tube videos that are circulating on the Internet. And, for those of us who are old enough, remember the old Art Linklater show "Kid's Say the Darndest Things"? Seriously, I'm sure God finds a lot of stuff we do humorous! Google, "The Darwin Awards" sometime! Wow, some of the goofy, dangerous and often, hilarious things people do! Now, laughter is, as we know, the best medicine. Ever wonder why that is? Well, it can certainly put a smile on our face when we're down but I think there's something more here. Maybe it's because laughter helps us gain perspective. It brings humility. It brings a different way of looking at ourselves, taking ourselves a little less seriously.

The great theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote "Humor is the beginning of faith, and laughter is the beginning of prayer." Abraham laughed. Sarah laughed. And I'm betting God laughed too. You can just imagine the inside joke between the three. "This is going to be good...No one's ever going to believe this could happen." I'm wondering if maybe laughter is our grace-filled way of getting out of ourselves. Maybe it's our way of realizing, as ludicrous and unbelievable as it may be, that God's promise holds firm. Maybe it's our way of admitting once and for all that we don't have it all figured out. That, in all honesty, we don't even have ourselves figured out. That there's a whole new identity just waiting for us to claim. With that in mind, I think it's safe to say within the context of our gospel reading, that Peter most definitely does NOT have it all figured out. I mean, certainly, not **correctly**. He thinks he does. But no, he doesn't. Not at all! When Jesus begins to speak of His suffering Peter will have none of it. Jesus, then, rebukes him with the familiar phrase "get thee behind me Satan!" Ouch! Still, I don't think that it was so much a case of Jesus thinking that Peter was the devil as much as it was a way of Jesus reprimanding Peter for espousing human values as opposed to God's.

Mark means for us to think about our own faith. The passage portrays Jesus as a model for the disciples. Each time Jesus speaks of Himself as the suffering servant, a messiah who must suffer and die, we find the disciples preoccupied with the exact opposite. That is, with what makes sense to them in terms of the world in which they live. But Mark tells us that true disciples should be ready to take up their own cross. It's the ultimate paradox as many things of faith are. We must lose our life to find it. We must die to live. We must give up everything to gain everything. This, on any number of levels, is just crazy. Crazy to almost to the point of being funny!

I mean – who writes this stuff?

Paul points out that the cross is foolishness. And it is, especially to those who refuse to try to understand it. But there's something really important here which we really need to follow! What do I mean? Well, essentially, discipleship is an out and out clash between two things; One is the values of the world, that is, worldly things, and two, what God values, Godly things. After all, we're taught to protect our own lives first, right? Yeah, well, Jesus said to give yourself away. We're told to save ourselves first; Jesus tells us that we're to risk our life to save another. Jesus Himself said (and tell me if this sounds familiar) "No one has greater love than this than to lay down one's life for one's friends." It would be like the flight attendant telling you to put the air mask on your neighbors first and then when everyone is set go ahead and put your own on. Yeah, like that would happen! Now this was as foreign to those first disciples as it is to us. Again, foreign almost to the point of being funny. Back then, usually only the strong survived. The weaker sought patrons among the wealthier, stronger, the more powerful, more politically connected and as an occupied country with the occupiers (the Romans) taxing the Judeans practically out of existence, it was everyone for themselves. It was a matter of survival! The disciples, not unlike us, aspired to power and greatness for themselves as well as for Jesus whom they patronized! Like us, they wanted to be on a winning team. And, like us, they didn't want themselves nor did they want to see anyone they loved suffer. But Jesus would have none of it and they clearly did not get it! In their minds how could their master, their friend, give up so easily? Especially if Jesus was who He'd said He was! So, who could blame Peter? He's just like us! More so than we're comfortable admitting!

Even in this day, most of us are still looking for Super Jesus to come and make everything okay! Wouldn't that be something? Of course, it would...but that's not what we've been promised. That's not what this way to the cross means nor what the cross is all about. Now, we may say, what about all of the various atonement theories? Especially Anselm's 11th century notion of Jesus being killed as a substitute for us? Don't they let us off the hook? Nope! Why? Well, it has to do with that "relationship" thing. See, we're not asked to just believe in Christ, we're asked to follow all the way to the cross. Now, most of us are probably not going to be asked to give up our life for another. And let's face it we live relatively safely and pretty darn comfortably in the big scheme of things. So, what does that look like for us? What does it look like to bear our cross? Now, I'm not talking about the cleaned-up, shiny cross at the front of the sanctuary! I'm talking about Golgotha. I'm talking about standing up for what is right. I'm talking about standing up for one's beliefs whether it's inconvenient, uncomfortable, or even if it's just downright dangerous. And even though most of us will probably never be hung on a cross for what we believe, we are called to live with different values, to let go of the things that impress the world, power, greatness, financial security, etc. You know, the usual stuff, and follow where God leads. That's Lent. A time to get out of ourselves. A time to open ourselves to possibilities, to ways of being what we cannot even begin to fathom, a time to take ourselves a little less seriously.

So, go ahead and laugh. It's only the beginning. The promise holds!

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.