

Blundering our way toward peace

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

2nd Sunday in Lent - February 28, 2021

Texts: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-17; Romans 4:13, 18-22; Mark 8:31-38

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-17

Last week, we learned about God's first covenant with humankind, the promise made to Noah and to all living things on earth never again to destroy the world with a flood. Here is the second great covenant.

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." Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?"

Romans 4:13, 18-22

Paul, the author of the letter to the Romans, frequently referred back to early days of biblical history to prove his point. Here, he points to Abraham, who is seen as the originator of the three great faith traditions known as Abrahamic: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

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.... 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."

Mark 8:31-38

Peter has just made a giant leap of faith and identified Jesus, his teacher and friend, as the long-expected Messiah. Then Peter proceeds to ... fall on his face.

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 proclaim Christ crucified - the wisdom and the power of God. TBTG

Tomorrow is the first day of March. The country has officially spent a year blundering our way through COVID-19, AKA coronavirus, AKA lockdown, economic disaster, political football, and on and on. Already not one but multiple vaccines have been approved with more on the way. None is 100% effective, but as we’ve heard, **“Don’t let the perfect be the enemy of the good.”** If the first vaccine had only been 50% effective, wouldn’t we still have cheered and lined up to get it? Have we made mistakes along the way? Too many to count. But we’re grateful for those who led the way, even if they didn’t get it right the first time.

God knows we hardly ever get things right the first time. Even God repented of making humans. But God gave people a second chance and hung up the rainbow like a note to self: “Don’t ever destroy the world with a flood again.” God told Noah, “When you see it, remember. This rainbow is a sign of my promise to you to limit my power. I’m going to let people be people. **You will make mistakes but that doesn’t mean you are a mistake.**”

A long time later, God promised Abram as many descendants as the stars in the sky or the grains of sand. But Abram got impatient. His wife Sarai told him to go ahead and make a baby with her maid Hagar. That baby was Ishmael. In today's reading, God tells Abraham to try again with Sarah. Abraham argues: “I have a son already. Can’t you work this out with Ishmael?” God tells Abraham. “No, but **Ishmael is not a mistake.** I’ll bless him and make him a great nation, too.” In Islam, Ishmael takes first place over Isaac. Abraham is as revered by Muslims as by Jews and Christians; all three faith traditions trace their origins back to him.

What tickles me about Abraham is how he falls on his face. Twice. The first time, he’s just overwhelmed that God Almighty is talking to him. Falling flat on your face was a sign of reverence. The second time, Abraham falls over laughing. He’s laughing about being 100 years old and having a baby with his 90-year-old wife.

I can’t blame him. Some things are so ridiculous you just have to laugh. True story: The other day, I got carded at the liquor store. Literally. I handed the clerk my ID and said, “I’m sixty-nine! Am I old enough? Wait, am I *too old*?” We were all laughing, including the young couple in line behind me. None of us fell on our faces, but it was close.

Nowadays, falling flat on your face means something else, like making a big blunder, like Peter did when he took Jesus aside and told him to cancel the crucifixion meme. “It’s not funny,” Peter was saying, “and I won’t let it happen. You’re the Messiah. You’ve got to live up to the job.”

Jesus said, “Go stand behind me, Satan.” He didn’t mean, “Pete, you’re evil,” but, “Pete, you’re getting in my way.” **Peter made a mistake but he himself was not a mistake.** Jesus didn’t send him away; he said, “Get behind me.” He says the same to the rest of them in the next verse. “Get behind me, shoulder your responsibility, take up your cross, and follow where I lead. Don’t be ashamed of suffering. It’s not a sign of weakness.” Remember when Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness? He turned down the enticing things Satan offered in order to follow his true path of hanging out with ordinary people, not lording it over them; of breaking bread with peasants, not dining alone on delicacies. Jesus chose to worship the one Almighty God rather than a second-rate imposter. Satan stands for anything that keeps us from the highest good, that distracts us from being our best selves.

There are times when we can’t let the perfect be the enemy of the good, like when you’ve got a vaccine that will save a lot of lives but maybe not quite all of them. And **there are times when we can’t let the good be the enemy of the perfect.** Remember that perfection in the Bible doesn’t mean “no mistakes.” Our mistakes don’t cancel the possibility of perfection. Perfection is bigger than that. It means wholeness, fullness, completeness. Our Lenten devotional zeroes in on this: Perfection is like the Old Testament “Shalom” - peace is more than the absence of war, it’s the full presence of God. Peace overflows to others; it’s contagious like covid, only in a good, healthy way. Contagious joy. Like fine food and wine, the perfection of peace is best enjoyed in company. Peace can *only* be experienced alongside others. **God desires perfection, wholeness, peace for you and for all people everywhere.**

How often do we settle for being just good enough? How often in my life did I choose a regular paycheck at a dumb job instead of following Jesus’ call to something better? How often have I chosen to put up and shut up instead of letting my voice ring out for justice and truth? How often do we settle for just balancing the books instead of reaching for the wide blue sky? We may not accomplish everything on the first try but here’s the good news: **We’ll make mistakes but we are not a mistake.** We can try again. Even if the goal sounds impossible.

Almighty God called Abraham to believe the impossible, to do the impossible. Fearlessly. In this covenant, both partners had a part to play. God’s part was blessing Abraham and Sarah with children. Abraham’s part was circumcising himself and Ishmael and Isaac. Think about it. Abe’s part of the covenant where God promised descendants was to perform a little surgery on every male. Circumcision had never been tried before. For all Abraham knew, this little cut might cancel the descendant thing right there.

But Abraham believed God could do the impossible. And God made a way out of no way. And God challenges us to do the impossible, to take the risk. To grow. To be partners with God in making things right in the world. **We'll make mistakes, but we are not a mistake.** Shalom, peace, perfection is possible. But not easy.

As someone in our anti-racism spiritual pilgrimage said, "There's no growth in comfort and no comfort in growth." I don't want to suffer and I don't want you to suffer. But I believe God wants us together to be more than we imagine. Yesterday's plans and achievements are today's maintenance mode. God doesn't call us to maintenance but to ministry, out beyond our walls, out beyond our comfort zones, into uncharted territory.

Would you learn more from your mistakes if you knew you wouldn't be condemned for them? If you hadn't been taught that Jesus had to die because you are a sinner, a mistake? **You may sin sometimes, as we all do, but you are not a mistake; God calls you as a covenant partner in fulfilling the promise of peace.** God's ultimate goal in Jesus was not about death but about life. Jesus' ministry was not about judgement but about new life. Second chances. Resurrection. About peace and perfection for people whose lives were broken by a broken system. He started talking about suffering and death when he realized his message made enemies of the people for whom the system was already working fine, and that they would kill him to shut him up. They crucified him but their plan failed. God's faithfulness, God's love, God's promises stood strong. God's promises still stand. They are for you and for your children and for all who dare to follow. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayers

Almighty God, God of second chances, make us merciful as you are merciful, just as you are just, and joyful as you are joyful. Help us never to settle for second best in our life with you, but pursue the perfection of peace and wholeness.

We thank you for the way you lead us out of ourselves and into relationships with others. Thank you for those who give freely of themselves to develop vaccines, and administer them, and care for those who are ill. Thank you for those who faithfully work in the food supply chain, and show up to low-paid jobs because people need them. Teach us to value their contributions and reward them appropriately.

We thank you for opening our eyes to troubled places on earth: Myanmar, Texas, Yemen, and wherever the Spirit guides our prayers. Show us how we can make a difference.

And we thank you for the promise of resurrection that comforts us in the valley of shadow, for Jesus led the way through the valley of shadow and rose again to assure us of the promise of life everlasting; and as he taught us, we pray....