

Our passage from Genesis this morning reports the third time God has spoken with Abraham about promises of the future. And these promises seem to be great.

*I will make of you a great nation!*

*You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations!*

*I will establish my covenant between me and you. . . .an everlasting covenant!*

Surely this is all good news, right? But in the 25 years since God first spoke promises to Abram and Sarai, not much has changed in their family status. They were childless then. They are childless now. And in their 90's, one can imagine why they might seem incredulous at God's repeated promises of offspring, ancestors, and blessing.

The story of Abram and Sarai is the story of two very imperfect people who manage to walk in faith and trust, despite themselves. And God, for reasons God understands, chooses them to be the ancestors of multitudes of nations and the three monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The good news for us, is that God willingly enters into relationship with people who are like us. People who make mistakes. People who turn away from grace.

Everyone in this text gets a new name. Abram becomes Abraham. Sarai becomes Sarah, and God is called "El Shaddai", or God Almighty. This passage is the first time El Shaddai occurs in the biblical text. Perhaps the new names are a tangible sign of the covenant. Much like in baptism, when we call the baptized by their name, it is a reminder that we are not a part of a crowd, but we are known by name, and claimed by God.

This covenant is also a reminder to us that all we have is a gift from God. We did not, we do not, earn this covenant. We receive this covenant. "Our concrete acts bear no more than a testimony to the divine promise of creation, reconciliation, and redemption."<sup>1</sup> This covenant is a sign that God chooses to be *for us*. We do respond to the covenant, seeking to live faithful lives, but we are always on the receiving end of grace.

And Abraham and Sarah, equipped with their new names, continue their story in trust and faith, and in their old age, give birth to a son, Isaac. They continue to live into their promises as they journey through life.

As you consider this text during Lent, I invite you to consider your relationship with God.

To consider the covenant between us and God.

Upon what does that relationship depend?

What are you doing to live into the relationship?

If God were to give you a new name, what might it be?

One name I invite you to try on in a new way this week, to see how it fits, is that of "Disciple".

Our New Testament passage today is a pivotal passage for Mark's gospel. Jesus has just asked his disciples "who do people say that I am?"

And "who do you say that I am?" And right after this passage, Jesus is transfigured on the mountainside. But before we can see the glory, Mark wants us to wrestle with questions of identity.

Who do you say that I am?

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Husbands in Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 2 (WJK Press, KY 2008) page 54.

In response to the question, Peter gives the right answer. "You are the Messiah."  
So then Jesus begins to teach them some things. To make sure that everyone understands the word "messiah" the same way Jesus does.

There will be great suffering;  
Rejection by the elders, chief priests and scribes;  
He will be killed;  
He will rise again from the dead three days later.

And in a gospel where Jesus spends a lot of time telling people to be quiet about what they've seen and heard, here he says these things quite openly.  
There is no messianic secret here. Mark makes clear that if you want to know one thing about Jesus, it is that he must undergo great suffering, rejection by the authorities, death on a cross, and resurrection from the dead. The centerpiece of this gospel is this message right here.

And Peter, in a move that I silently applaud, rebukes Jesus. This word is the word used when Jesus rebukes unclean spirits, when Jesus rebukes the waves and the sea. And Peter rebukes Jesus. We, of course, know that it is the wrong thing to do. Silly Peter. Don't *rebuke* Jesus. Remember? He's the Messiah.

I am on the sidelines cheering Peter on, though. Because, really, is this the message anyone wants to hear? Do you know how long I wrestled with this text this week? I don't want to preach this. I, like Peter, want Jesus to be a Messiah who will deliver us from the bad guys. I wonder what Peter said when he rebuked Jesus. "Let's stop this nonsense of suffering and death, Jesus. We know enough about suffering. Let's talk about power. Let's talk about bringing back the throne of David. Let's make people happy!"

But, of course, Jesus is having none of that. Peter should know that the man who *rebukes the wind* will have no trouble rebuking him. "Get behind me, Satan. For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Ouch.

And Jesus then goes on to describe how our preconceptions of divine things are all wrong. God will not be confined to human expectations or desires. "God is found in uncertainty, danger, and suffering...precisely where human wisdom perceives God's absence."<sup>2</sup>

And so those of us who want to become disciples, are supposed to take up our own crosses and follow him. It isn't in the miracles we're called to be like Jesus. He's not expecting us to calm storms or cast out demons. He wants us to walk in his path. And his path is not one of glory, at least not by the world's understanding. It is not one of success by the world's understanding. It is not even a path of life by the world's understanding. But it is on the path where we become disciples. The act of following Jesus is the education we need.

Being a follower of Jesus requires us to acknowledge that the world's understanding of things is not how God understands the world. And, much like the covenant with Sarah and Abraham, this is good news for us. The things of this world that cause us so much pain and heartache will not ultimately prevail. Even death is conquered in the person of Jesus Christ.

Being a follower of Jesus requires something else of us as well. If you'll look at your Bibles, notice who Jesus talks to. When he rebukes Peter, he turns and looks at the disciples—"I may be talking to Peter right this very moment", he seems to be saying, "but this could just

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph D. Small, *ibid.* page. 72.

have easily been you." And then, when he tells his disciples about the cost of discipleship, he calls the crowd over. This is, more or less, the same crowd that's been following Jesus wherever he goes. And miracles, healings and teachings draw big crowds.

But in this passage, Jesus tells the crowds that if *any one* of them want to follow him, they'll have to pick up a cross and follow him. And crowds can't carry a cross.

To be a disciple of Jesus, you can't stay in the crowd. At some point, you have to step out of the anonymity of the crowd and pick up a cross. Not to suffer just so you can say you suffered, but to stand for something. To set your mind on divine things rather than human things. Being a Christian is not something you inherit from your parents. Being a disciple is a decision to turn toward God.

This morning, we're going to do a reverse offering. The youth are passing out crosses. I invite you to take a cross.

This week, put the cross somewhere that you'll see it in the course of your day. In your wallet, perhaps. Or tape it to the cupboard in the kitchen. Put it on the dashboard of the car. And when you see it, I hope it will encourage you to consider if and how you are being called to leave the crowd and become a disciple. We are continuing on this Lenten journey together as a community. But becoming a disciple and picking up a cross and following Jesus is not something that the community or a crowd can do for you. But what the community can do is to walk alongside you, giving you support on the journey. Perhaps together, we can focus on setting our minds on divine things. Amen.