

SCRIPTURE for Time with Children: 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. <sup>2</sup>And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” <sup>3</sup>Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, <sup>4</sup>“As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you.

<sup>7</sup>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. <sup>15</sup>God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. <sup>16</sup>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.”

SCRIPTURE Reading: Mark 8:31-38

<sup>31</sup>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. <sup>32</sup>He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. <sup>33</sup>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.”

<sup>34</sup>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. <sup>35</sup>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. <sup>36</sup>For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? <sup>37</sup>Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? <sup>38</sup>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.”

SERMON: “Surprising Reversals” The Rev. Brent Damrow

For the two of them, it had been a lifetime, even if it felt more like an eternity. For Him, it had been just a moment. But in that breath and His proclamation, infinity suddenly emerged. For both, it was a core truth and a blessing that came in surprising ways. Abram and Sarai, two models of faith. When God said get up and go, they went, deliverance after deliverance after deliverance. And yet, I have to imagine what they yearned most for, and if the heart of what God first promised them seemed so elusive if not impossible. Abram was already 75 when God first came to him in Haran. With that promise of nation and blessing, with that promise that he would be a father, not just to one, but to so many. I wonder if that night he dared tell Sarai at all. I wonder if the two of them dared dream at all, because I have to imagine that long ago they had made peace with what they thought might be. Maybe it was an anxious peace, maybe it was a difficult peace about those children who had so stubbornly refused to come.

It would be another 11 years. Abram was 86 when he and Sarai let go of that promise and they settled for something. Maybe they had to. Maybe it was their coping mechanism. For it was too painful to keep hoping year after year for that thing that was so hard. So the Bible tells us they took it upon themselves to try to manufacture what God had promised, to use their own viewpoint to define the blessing that God had proclaimed was on its way. And so Ishmael was born to Hagar.

By the time we get to our reading in the Children's Time today, Abram is 99. At the end of a full century, but then again, at the beginning of another, when God comes back with surprises that change everything. New names, new possibilities, new blessings. And to get all those things, they had to let go of the house of cards that they had built to cope, and let the impossible possible enter in.

Oh, Peter, his name had already changed from Simon. He'd been following Jesus for a while now, for a couple years likely, a blip on the radar screen from what Abram and Sarai had experienced. But Peter, in the moment before today's reading in Mark, Peter had come likewise to a new beginning that could change everything for him, did change everything for the world, and can still change everything for us. Peter there had finally gotten it right. He had pronounced the truth of who Jesus was. "You are the Messiah," he proclaimed with his lips. "You are the one blessed and sent by God with a purpose to bring salvation to the whole world."

And it wasn't a nanosecond after that that Peter's own imagination, his own human needs, his own tendencies to cope with the moment of that time, suddenly began to manufacture what that would look like and what it would all mean. Peter imagined this, he knew how important it was. But he imagined that Jesus would rule in a kingly sort of way, that Jesus would rule in a kingdom sort of way, that Israel would be restored in a national kind of way. And you can't blame him, for they were in the midst of so much turmoil. Peter, like Abram and Sarai, and like you and me, manufactured this whole future out of his own limited imagination.

And then not one breath later, not one moment later, when Peter gets it right and then gets it wrong, Jesus echoes the truth that will change everything. The earth will do what the earth does when people who speak truth come. They will try to put it out. The powers of the earth will do what the powers of the earth do when they are threatened. They will hold onto it with every last breath no matter whose life it costs. But God. That is not the reason for Jesus. Remember, God surprising earth, not with more earth, not with more of our own ideas of power, but instead with heaven itself. Two profoundly human responses to difficult situations, ways of making peace or at least settling for something that we can handle.

Friends, what are you settling for these days? What are you settling for in the midst of this pandemic that shows such signs of breaking and yet hasn't. What are you doing in the midst of this winter that shows signs of breaking and yet hasn't. What are you doing in your faith life? Who are you proclaiming Jesus to be, and why do you think it matters? What are the things you are settling for? Because, you see, the humans in our stories today, all of them – well, and the Divine, too – they eventually accepted, maybe even embraced God's surprise over their own wisdom. They changed, and so did the whole world.

Sarah and Abraham stopped human scheming and Isaac was born. Abraham lived into his new name, Ancestor of a Multitude is what that means. He was a parent along with Sarah of a gaggle that will number as many as the grains of sand on a beach or stars up in the sky. It took Peter a while longer. He would stumble again on this journey. He would be a denier. He would be a hider. But he went from setting his mind on human ideas of power and might, and he lived into his name, too – the Rock. He became the one who would feed Jesus' sheep just like Jesus asked him. He would be the one who would testify in the face of power, and the one who would nurture the first gatherings of what became church.

So the question this morning is what are you holding onto that is of your own making, rather than allowing God's surprise to show you new things? What identity of your own making are you clinging to, rather than embracing the new name, the new identity, the new purpose God is calling you to now? Because such things are not limited to the pages of Scripture or some long lost day. They are happening right now to you and me. You, in fact, sang such a truth in our opening hymn. You sang it with your own lips, using your own breath, that Spirit, that *Ruach* that God placed within you. Here is what you sang, if you don't remember:

“God it is who speaks and names us, knows our being, touches base, making space within our thinking, lifting shades to show the sun, raising courage when we're shrinking, finding scope for faith begun.” God naming, inviting, lifting shades. That is at the heart of Lent, unpacking our bags (remember last week's sermon?), that God might adorn and fill them with the stuff of rainbows. Laying down our baggage that Jesus might equip us with something else to carry – a life-giving cross.

That is the good news, and it is all true. But I also don't want to sugarcoat anything. The road is and has been hard. There is real need in these times for us to be able to cope with things that are beyond us, with things that we can't imagine. In all times, including these, there is loss, there is grief, there is pain, there is limitation. We have been viscerally reminded this past year, sometimes in hard ways, about the loss of tradition, understanding, routine. You and I have had to be resilient and creative to find ways both to connect and cope. Coping mechanisms help us get through times that are beyond ourselves. Discovering ways to cope – that's not a bad thing. It gives us the ability to hang in, to survive. It's critical when things are beyond us.

And yet, a couple things I would offer. Don't confuse our human strategies that allow us to survive with the Divine desire that we might thrive. “I came to offer life abundantly,” Jesus said. So if those coping mechanisms that at one time felt so good are beginning to get in the way, let go of them and find what God has in mind for you. Never confuse what we have learned to accept as a reality with what God desires for human destiny. Don't confuse what we think is the nature of the world with what is instead how we have made the world.

Second, pay attention in this Lenten journey to what Jesus does when things are beyond him. And it is never turning in, it is always turning out. Jesus will go to pray, so pray. Jesus will make connections and dine with sinners and saints too, so make connections and dine in safe ways with the saints and the sinners among us. And remember what Jesus does in Lent. It is what he did in last week's reading. He keeps moving, always bringing the story with him to the next story so that they might talk to each other.

We have learned so much in this last year. Sometimes we get so focused on the ways we have fallen short. But it is amazing how we have also come together to do things like wear masks to take care of each other, to wash our hands, simple gestures of kindness. Blessing others, to think of them, and reach out in connection. Helping others and maybe most difficult of all, allowing ourselves to be helped. Often we have learned, not by our own ingenuity, but by some blessing that landed at our feet.

Lent is about letting go of the settling we have done with our reality, our identity, what we think we can do, for the calling that God is laying at our feet if we simply set out. The call of Lent includes sacrifice, and even cost and pain. But I think also at the heart of what Jesus is talking about in our message today is that we have to give up our limited ideas for God's unlimited purpose. We have to give up our assuredness for God's unlimited surprise. Heaven itself is ready to break forth here upon earth. Are you?

We, like Peter, think we know what we want and what we need. We, like Peter, think we know what the cross is. But the cross is a human invention of torture, and in Lent and Easter we come face to face with the greatest surprise that God is going to do to that barbaric thing. Lay down what you think you know. Pick up that cross and follow me, even if the world scoffs, judges or condemns, Jesus says in today's reading.

We know what the cross of Jesus looked like. But we don't know what God might surprise us with our own. Maybe it's about helping or having the courage to cry out for help. We do know that Abraham and Sarah's looked like a little bundle of joy they named Isaac. Peter found flocks of faithful coming in response to his cross. What will yours look like? What life do you need to leave behind to find the great grace that Christ is offering in his way, in his words, and in his life?

Yes, Jane Austen, there may be inconvenience to surprise. For change always does bring with it the discomfort of unknowing. But in both passages this morning of human change, we find comfort that the Divine in both passages is also willing to accept new identities to be part of this continuing love affair, this unfolding covenant, earth and heaven locked in embrace. God didn't just rename Sarai and Abram. God for the first time offered here a new name for Godself -- God the Almighty. Not for puffery or for God's sake, but for ours, to remember just who is walking with us, just who is behind all these promises that we may indeed need to wait for.

And Jesus, remember at his baptism that Jesus allowed God to rename him too, allowed God to give him purpose and path. "You are my Beloved," God says. Let go of your identity and let that identity guide everything that you do. Jesus knew it wouldn't be easy. And yet, this week he is again moving forward, each surprise bringing with him to the next.

Friends, it is time for us, yes, us beloved too, to hear God's inviting call. Past our machinations and fear, and simply come as we are, so that the God of surprises will do what God does -- claim us, love us, bless us, and set us upon a path where we too will be a blessing. What a gift indeed! Amen.