

This season of Lent, we are exploring the faithful promises of God and Covenant. Last week we read of God setting a Bow in the clouds and a promise to Noah and all creatures to never again destroy the earth by flood. It is the first and most universal covenant God makes. Today we read of the third covenant conversation God has with Abram. This covenant will be a blessing to all nations, not just the nation of Israel. It is a global covenant the LORD makes with his children, a covenant with all nations.

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-17

17:1 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.

17:2 And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous."

17:3 Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him,

17:4 "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations.

17:5 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.

17:6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you.

17:7 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.

17:15 God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name.

17:16 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."

17:17 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?"

Mark 8:31-38

8:31 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.

8:32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

8:33 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."

8:34 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.

8:35 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.

8:36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

8:37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?

8:38 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."

Proclamation of the Word

The saying "Live long and prosper"ⁱ could have been said of our Father and Mother in the faith, Abraham and Sarah. Our great-grandparents in the faith indeed did live long and prosper. The covenant God made with them was a blessing for all generations as well.

The Vulcan salute and saying came to mind this Friday upon the death of Leonard Nimoy. Nimoy is the actor who portrayed Mr. Spock on the series, *Star Trek*. He died at the ripe age of 83 after living his life in the shadow or glow perhaps of this character. Hopefully, you have heard of the series and it's cultural impact on the world. If not, you have been living on the Klingon capital of Kronos. I feel compelled to assist in your pop cultural knowledge of inane trivia, and let you know that it actually does relate to our Genesis text for today. Hang in there with me- go *Star Trek* nerd for a moment here.

Nimoy created the sign and saying. Growing up as a boy, his grandfather took him to the Orthodox Jewish synagogue. And the V sign made by the Vulcan is actually based on a priestly blessing Nimoy saw at synagogue. The V is actually the Hebrew letter *shin*. When the priest would raise his hands offering the benediction, hands would look like this.....and the sign stands for *El Shaddai*, the name Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob called God. So all these years Mr. Spock has been offering a sort of priestly blessing on the

universe saying, "Live long and prosper." God rest his soul. Now you know the origin of the Vulcan sign. You're welcome.

When God speaks to Abram, God says,

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"I am *El Shaddai* (God Almighty); walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous."

Abram falls on his face in worship and reverence for the LORD is speaking to him. And the LORD tells Abram his name, *El Shaddai*, God Almighty. This is first time God's name shows up in Scripture. Something big is happening. God has spoken to Abram on two occasions promising that his descendents would be as numerous as the stars. The second encounter Abram is told that he will have a son. That son is Ishmael whom he fathers with his servant, Hagar. So this third conversation with God and Abram is not a new covenant. It is a sort of revision or update. God has a plan, but it is being revealed in God's time.

Perhaps you know something about waiting for God to reveal a plan for your life. I remember being in that Sr. Year in college and praying very hard, Lord, show me the way. I never received a road map. Life seems to unfold one step at a time- a nudge here, a door opening there, a door closing, and all along praying and keeping your heart and your eyes open. I imagine that is how Abram and Sarai felt. They were not given a map, only a promise.

Sometimes we lay aside the life we have planned, for the life God dreams for us. And through it, we know the blessing of God. Maybe it is not clear in the beginning, as with Abram and Sarai, but you just start walking with God. *El Shaddai* says to Abram, "walk before me"- meaning in a trusting relationship with me. Abram and Sarai know there is a plan that they will have a land and children, but the particulars are left out. And that is where the TRUST comes in. At first Abram falls on his face in worship, but by the end he is falling on his face and laughing at the impossible possibility that he would father a child at 100 years old, and Sarai will give birth at 90. That's ridiculous!

Similarly in today's gospel passage, Peter has another plan in mind for Jesus. When Jesus tells that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer, Peter is incredulous. This can't be! Peter

rebukes Jesus, the Son of God right there. Both Peter and Abraham are surprised that God's ways are so incomprehensible, so foolish.

Lent is a time when we examine our own walk with God. Cameron Howard writes,

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"Laughter may seem a little uncouth during Lent; after all, this is a season of spiritual practices, of discipline, forty somber days in which we pack up our Alleluias and put them in storage. Even so, we do well to remember every year that the promises of the Gospel are foolishness in the eyes of the world. "ⁱⁱⁱ

And Rigby and Brown,ⁱⁱⁱ comment,

"...one thing is clear: God messes with histories as we know and expect them; God changes our plans, confounds our expectations, and staggers our imaginations; God alters lives, families, communities, and the very course of world events. Sometimes these changes are unwelcome, as in the case of Peter. Sometimes they are impossible, as in the case of Abraham and Sarah."

God's purposes will be accomplished even through imperfect humans. For we know that Abraham, Sarah, and Peter have their shortcomings. Fred Craddock says, "That even God can draw a straight line with a crooked stick." God fulfills his faithful promises through us and even in spite of us.

Maybe you have had a life plan, that somehow changed when you began to trust God with your life. Perhaps an event, a God moment, and encounter with *El Shaddai*, God Almighty, occurred that changed the whole trajectory of your life.

Maybe you had to rearrange your finances, your location, change jobs or schools, to follow God's plan.

Maybe you even felt like the people of God who wandered for a while in the wilderness, or Jesus who was tempted in the wilderness.

Perhaps your idea of "Live long and prosper" changes your idea of success or prosperity to include the great benefits of becoming a blessing to others by God's grace. God blesses us to be a blessing. That is true prosperity.

Maybe you have fallen on your face, not with laughter, but with failure, trying to be faithful, but you learned and picked yourself up moving forward in faith and trust.

Maybe like Abraham and Sarah, instead of taking a trip with your retirement savings, you had to build a nursery for the new baby that is on the way. Or perhaps like Peter, you had to let go of your vision, to embrace the suffering, fear, and eventually new life that God intended. Maybe you understand Peter, Abraham and Sarah, better than most.

Maybe as a church, we give up the phrase "we've never done it that way before" for Lent and start saying "let's try it!" Or we embrace a bold, new master plan for our facilities trusting God to bless our endeavors and to make a way for current and future generations to know God, to love God, and to love and serve others in God's name.

Maybe you never expected to serve as an officer of this church, but you are standing before the congregation today. You are making vows to God, but not alone, for the congregation is making promises today, too, to trust your leadership and to support you in ministry. You have gone through training, but in the months and years ahead you will pray for God's guidance and seek to walk with God for the sake of the Church of Jesus Christ, who alone is Head of the church.

I think the most important part of this encounter is that God and Abram are becoming more intimate. This intimacy is marked by the sharing of names. God reveals his name to Abram, and gives Abram and Sarai new names marking a big change. They will be named Abraham which means something like "Big Daddy" and Sarah, which means princess.

In the same way, Peter is so intimate with Jesus that he tells Jesus what he really thinks! Now Jesus returns the favor calling him names, "Get behind me, Satan!" Peter gets a new name, but just for a moment. Peter is setting his mind on human things and not God's ways and plans. Sometimes we must deny ourselves, our plans, to follow Jesus.

The exchange of names implies a new relationship. When God said, "I El Shaddai, take you Abram and Sarai." there were no guarantees, clear directions, or a map. But there was a promise. And God can be trusted with the promises God makes.

My friend, Jan, whom I get to see this week at a Continuing Education event, told me about something that happened with her son, Jay. At bedtime, Jan and her husband Fred, would recite the Priestly Aaronic blessing^{iv} with their children at bedtime each night,

May the LORD bless you and keep you.

May the LORD be kind and gracious unto you...you probably have heard it. They were teaching their child to walk before God, like our parents in the faith.

When Jay was in elementary school, his teacher became pregnant. She was having complications and had to leave her position earlier than expected to care for herself and the baby. Jan and Jay were out at the mall one day and ran into the teacher, who shared her story and how much she missed the kids. She became teary. Jay, by instinct, simply placed his hand on his teacher's arm, bowed his head, and said this blessing.

May the LORD bless you and keep you.

May the LORD be kind and gracious unto you.

May the LORD shine his face upon you and give you peace.

...which caused his teacher to weep...and then smile.

God's hand of blessing is like that. We might get a good laugh at first when we learn of God's audacious plans for us, or even be moved to tears, but when we trust God's promises to be true, not only do we receive a blessing, but all those who come after us through faith do, too.

We are the children of Abraham and Sarah. Faith is in our DNA, and we walk before God Almighty. Let's walk boldly in trust together. (Or in the spirit of Star Trek, "Boldly go where no man has gone before")

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ⁱ "[Leonard Nimoy: 'Star Trek' fans can be scary](#)". *Hero Complex*. Los Angeles Times. May 11, 2009. Retrieved May 14, 2009. Notes from wikipedia "In his autobiography *I Am Not Spock*, Nimoy wrote that he based it on the Priestly Blessing performed by Jewish Kohanim with both hands, thumb to thumb in this same position, representing the Hebrew letter Shin (ש), which has three upward strokes similar to the position of the thumb and fingers in the salute. The letter Shin here stands for El Shaddai, meaning "Almighty (God)", as well as for Shekinah and Shalom. Nimoy wrote that

when he was a child, his grandfather took him to an Orthodox synagogue. There he saw the blessing performed and was impressed by it.^[21]



ⁱⁱ [Commentary](#), Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16, Cameron B.R. Howard, Preaching This Week, *WorkingPreacher.org*, 2015.

ⁱⁱⁱ Preacher Prep: Second Sunday in Lent, February 1st, 2015 Sally Brown, Cynthia Rigby

^{iv} Numbers 6:23-27