

2nd Sunday in Lent
March 4, 2007

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18
Philippians 3:17 – 4:1
Luke 13:31-35

St. Paul's Lutheran, Red Wing, MN
Pastor Kristen Schlauderaff

How do you believe, when there is no evidence to support your belief? How do you trust, when nothing seems trustworthy?

This is the story of Abraham and Sarah. This is the pivotal and primal story of faith. The Covenant. The promise. The basis of all else.

It is the story of life and death. It is the story of faith and doubt. It is a story that repeats itself over and over again in the community of faith. It is our story.

You know the story all too well. We refer to Abraham and Sarah all the time, in hymns, in liturgy. Even the apostle Paul uses them as an example, yet after Sunday School we do not really hear their story very often. We remember, perhaps what we learned as children. Yet this is a very grown up story.

Abram and Sarai (their names at the beginning of the story) receive the promise that they will have a son. In fact, not only will they have a son, but their descendants will become a great nation. They will have so

many descendants, that you will not be able to count them, anymore than you could count the stars in the sky.

Once upon a time, a cousin of mine and I were sitting at a wedding reception, catching up on our lives. He and I were decidedly single at the time with no immediate prospects for marriage...not even distant prospects. We decided that our mothers, (who are sisters) had a primary goal of having grandchildren. They would like us to get married first, but really, their main aim was grandchildren. At that time, the two of us were not helping them out at all.

For Abraham and Sarah it was more than a funny story, even though Sarah laughed when she heard the promise the first time. Even in our day this is a common yearning. In ancient days this was a matter of survival. If you did not have children, how would the family continue? Who would receive the promise, the legacy? How would a people, a nation continue in existence if there were not enough children?

This is the problem. God makes this marvelous promise to Abram and Sarai. This promise is life changing. Indeed, this promise changes their identity. They become Abraham and Sarah. They have a new life, a new existence in this promise. And there is absolutely no evidence that this promise can be fulfilled. They are old. There have been no children.

They try to take the promise into their own hands. By doing so they even put this promise in jeopardy.

Yet God invites them, over and over again, to live as if the promise is true. God repeats the promise, makes it again and again, and invites them into life with God. They are invited to faith.

Here are the lessons of Abraham and Sarah. Faith is an invitation. Faith is a choice. We may resist the invitation. We may choose to turn away. No one is forced to believe. No one is forced to obey. Indeed, here is the puzzle – Almighty and all-powerful God does not force you to believe. Almighty and all-powerful God does not even force you to obey. God invites you. God asks you. You choose to respond or not.

We are called to be partners, to wrestle with God as Jacob will in the night. We are called to argue with God as Abraham, Moses and Job will all do. We are invited to come under the shelter of God's wing, God's protection, but we are never forced. We are not puppets. We are not robots.

And we are invited. Faith is an opportunity, an invitation to the banquet. We are invited to share in the bounty, in the mission, in the purpose of God's good creation. We are invited to become partners, as if we are the owners, though we are not, and to live as if all of this was ours,

though it is not. Then we are called to live as God would live, with love and mercy and in covenant. We are invited to live in relationship.

Abraham and Sarah received an unbelievable promise and then are invited to live as if the promise is true. They are called to live as creatures of hope*, even when there is no hope. They are called to live as if the promise is true, even when it does not appear to be true. It does not even appear to be possible.

What about us? We are given all that we need. We are in a virtual garden of Eden with every fruit that you can imagine. We have everything we need. What if we lived as if that promise was true? What if we lived as if we had enough? What if we lived as if we believed God really would provide for us every day? Could we then find a way to feed those who do not have enough? Could we find a way to share all that we have, including security, prosperity, and dignity?

A publication from Lutheran Social Services once told the story of a foster child newly arrived to his host family. He would come to the dinner table and eat so fast that he would have a stomachache after the meal, almost to the point of being sick. He would eat too much and too quickly. They soon learned that there had rarely been enough food in the home from which he came. He had to eat fast to get anything, to get enough.

There might not be anything to eat tomorrow, so he ate everything he saw as quickly as he could. His foster family took him to the refrigerator and showed him the food they would eat the next day. They opened the cupboard and showed him the food that would have later in the week. They invited him to share in making the meal plan for the week, so he could see what food they would have and see that it was available. It was a promise he could depend upon. There was enough.

What if we lived as we had enough? What if we believed that God really will provide? Would there be any hungry people in the world, if we believed it?

The gift of God is given especially to those who trust and who will risk according to what is promised.* The reward is God's generous response to those who heed the divine call and share in God's life. The reward is life with God. Faith invites us to trust God's future even in the deadly present. Faith is receiving the goodness of God promised in spite of the way the world is. The faith of Abraham is not in anything he sees in the world. His faith is in a word which will overcome the barrenness of the world. The **problem** for the faithful is that those who believe in the promise and hope against barrenness nevertheless must live WITH the barrenness.* The challenge of faith is that the evidence around us

contradicts God's promises. That is the power of evil. Evil tells you something else is true. Evil tries to convince you NOT to believe in the promises of God. Evil tells you that you must depend upon yourself. Evil tells you that you had better build store houses for tomorrow. Evil tells you take care of Number One first and you are Number One. Evil gets your eyes focused on yourself. Faith invites our eyes toward God and toward God's promises.

God invites us. Jesus invites us under the redeeming wing of God's mercy. We are invited this day. We are invited every day under the shelter of God's arms of mercy. Let us live as if it is true and it will be true. That is faith. Amen.

* Genesis, Interpretation, A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Walter Brueggemann. Starred quotes come from pp.140-147