

Promises, Promises

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

In one of their songs, the rock band U2 describes someone who is unreliable as being like “a promise in the year of election.” There are promises, and there are promises. Election year promises tend to not be the kind you put much stock in. Our faith is built upon promises. Not the kind that are made and then not kept, but the kind that stand the test of time.

Abraham stands as one of the great models of what it means to trust in God’s promises, and to act faithfully in response to God’s word. God’s call first came to Abraham when he was 75 years old. God called Abraham to take his wife Sarah and all his possessions and set off into the unknown, to another home that God promised to provide for them. Abraham was not told where he was going, but he knew who was leading him. And that was enough for him.

You see, the trustworthiness of promises rests not only on *when* they are made, but on *who* it is that is making them. At that time, Abraham was still known as Abram, and his wife was still named Sarai. Their names would change later to Abraham and Sarah, which is in itself a very important part of the story. For now, what is important to remember is that Abram’s relationship with God began with a promise. A promise made by God to Abram. The basic outline of the promise looked like this: Abram was to go to and settle a land that God would show him. Abram and Sarai, would produce descendants who would become a great nation. God would bless him so that through him all the families of the earth would be blessed.

God soon delivered on the part of the promise that related to land and material blessings. Abram was given plenty of property and prosperity. With the giving of the land, came the renewal of another part of the promise. God told Abram that this land would belong to Abram’s offspring forever. Maybe God had neglected to do His homework on this though, because Abram had no offspring. Sarai was barren. They had no children at all who could inherit this land. All they had was God’s word. Oh, and then, there’s this...Abram and Sarai were in their seventies!

In the passage from Paul’s letter to the Romans, he says that Abraham, “hoping against hope” *still believed* that he would become the father of many nations. To hope against hope is “to continue to hope, although the outlook does not warrant it. They might just as well have put a picture right next to the definition, of Abram and Sarai; a couple of seventy-somethings, waiting for the stork to arrive.

But despite all evidence to the contrary, Abram and Sarai *did* hope that God would fulfill this promise. Maybe their faith came from the fact that God had already proven to be someone who could be counted on to fulfill promises. That's the difference between hope and optimism. Optimism is a vague sense that everything will work out for the best somehow. Optimism works by minimizing life's problems. Hope, on the other hand, takes life's problems seriously, yet it takes even more seriously something greater than those problems.

Jim Wallis of Sojourners says, "Hope means more than just hanging on. It is the conscious decision to see the world in a different way than most others see it ... to look through the eyes of faith ... to know that the present reality will not have the last word ... to know that God rules."

Isn't that the kind of hope our world needs today? Hope in a future when we can all enjoy again a post-pandemic existence where a virus does not define the nature of community? But also, to be assured that other diseases which separate us—diseases like poverty, violence and injustice—will one day be eradicated?

Isn't that the hope that you need? That your present difficult realities—whatever they may look like and however long they have been hanging over you—that none of those realities will have the last word in your life? A hope that rests on the certainty that of God's promise of a better reality? Where swords are traded in for ploughshares and spears exchanged for pruning hooks? A reality that Jesus called "the Kingdom of Heaven"? What we need is no different than what Abram and Sarai needed. A hope that rests on God's steadfast promises. On God's gracious nature. A hope that stands the test of time. Because twenty-four years after God promised them that they would have more descendants than there were grains of sand scattered on the earth, or stars strewn across the skies, the fact is that they were still waiting for their *first* child.

When Abram was 99 years old God appeared before him again. "I am God Almighty" God said by way of introduction. That's El Shaddai in Hebrew. Scholars aren't 100% positive about the meaning of that name for God. This is the first place that it shows up in the Bible. So, you might say that Abram and Sarai aren't the only ones who get a new name in this story. God gets a new name, too.

It's possible that El Shaddai means God of the Mountains. Which would make sense because mountains represent unshakable strength and immovable permanence. The winter storms that blasted through Texas recently, leaving destruction, suffering and death, remind us that precious little in our world compares to the stability and permanence of mountains.

Maybe it feels as if very little in your life feels that solid. We need God to be El Shaddai for us if we are to sustain an enduring hope in the future; if we are to pick up the broken pieces of our world or the broken pieces of our lives. Because when our hope for tomorrow is grounded in

God's reliability, it gives us the courage to respond to the challenges and uncertainties of life not out of panic or despair, but out of faith.

Abram and Sarai believed God and remembered God's promises, even when time stretched on and on without any reasonable sign that God had remembered them. As a result, God renamed them both. Abram's name was changed to Abraham, which means "father of a multitude. Sarai became Sarah, which means Princess or Queen, a mother of Kings. For the Hebrews, a name was not just a name. One's name was a statement of identity. It told the world who you were.

For the remainder of their days, Abraham and Sarah shared a name and an identity that was grounded in their hope and trust in God's promise to them. A promise that would be fulfilled, against all odds and against the laws of nature itself, with the birth of their son Isaac in their old age. Their new names have spoken to one generation after another of God's promises to transform all lives that place their trust in God. It is Abraham and Sarah's perseverance in hoping that God's promise to them would be fulfilled that remains a model to so many others who find themselves hoping against hope in the face of life's trials. Which is why, to this day, it is not Abraham's achievements for which he has been remembered, but his faith.

Lent invites to hope in a promise that is no less preposterous than the one in which Abraham and Sarah trusted. The promise that, it is through a messiah who suffered, was crucified and died that you and I have been reconciled to God. It is a promise that even Jesus' disciples found hard to swallow, at first. Our faith is built upon promises and more promises. But they are promises that are backed up by God's faithfulness to us; a faithfulness that came to Abraham and Sarah in the form of a child named Isaac.

A faithfulness that came to us in a child named Jesus. When we trust the promises of God, made manifest to us in the person of Jesus, like Abram and Sarai, you and I are given a new name. That name is "Christian." It is a name that redefines *our* identity. A name that holds forth the hope that we can be a people who have faith in a promise that builds a community of persons working toward an ever more perfect love with God and neighbor, a community of faith, a community of hope, a community we call the church.

Not a community that is bound by our own sins and weaknesses –but experiences the liberating power of God's Spirit among us and within us. A hopeful, excited community. Who dare to imagine that the unlikely can become reality, that participates in impossible dreams, and expects the promise of God to reverberate through the ages, starting here and now.

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