

Promise

Readings

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. ²And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.' ³Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, ⁴'As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁵No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁶I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷I 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.

¹⁵ God said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶I 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.'

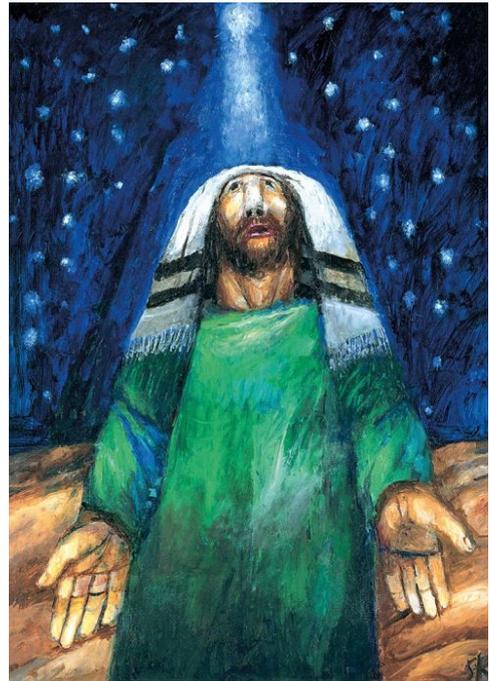
Mark 8:31-38

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. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But 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.'

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. ³⁵For 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. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸Those 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.'

Hear what God's Spirit is saying to the church.

Thanks be to God.



"Abraham" by Sieger Köder

Reflection

We praise you, O God of all generations, all time, and all space. When we wonder if you will respond to our prayers, remind us that you answer. Strengthen our faith so we might trust in your promises. Continue to journey with us as we seek to be your faithful disciples throughout all generations. Amen.

Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for Lent 2, 28 February 2021, p.36

In preparing us to remember the death and resurrection of Jesus at Easter time, our Bible readings take us down two streams: through the Hebrew Scriptures we explore the covenants God makes with God's people; and through the gospels, we encounter the cost of following Jesus to the cross.

Over the past three days it has been my privilege to share with people from across Australia as we wrestled with how we share the gospel today - what is "good news" for today's world and how can we share it with confidence? It partly comes out of some research I did a few years ago which revealed that here in the Uniting Church, while we are enthusiastic about serving others and speaking out for justice, we can't always articulate clearly why and we lack confidence in how we speak the good news of Jesus Christ.

One of the things we spoke about is how our understanding of particular passages from the scripture, or our lack of attention to the detail, or our extrapolation from the scriptures into doctrine, all contribute to us sometimes being less than convincing when we are trying to explain what we know to others. And today's passages provide two examples of how we can get tongue-tied sometimes.

Last week we were reminded of God's covenant with Noah and with all living flesh - to never again destroy the earth.

This week we hear God inviting Abram to "walk before me" or, as it might otherwise be translated, to walk "in my presence".

And as you do, you will be given a new identity, a new name, Abraham. You will be the father of many nations, *many* nations - not just Israel - many nations.

Sarai too. She will also have a new identity, Sarah, and she will bear a child and give rise to many nations. "Be fruitful", says God echoing the words of the creation story in Genesis 1:28.

Again, like the covenant with Noah, while it echoes of beauty and lasting assurance, at the same time this covenant can be problematic. The lectionary skips over the part where God gives Abraham land (17:8) - land that already was already occupied by the Canaanites.

How do our indigenous brothers and sisters hear this today?

How do we hear this today?

Does this really give us "authority" to take land that belongs to another people? And what about Israel? Is this really establishing the lands of Israel as God-given and therefore inalienable?

It is possible that this part the covenant were added at a time when the people of Israel were in exile, when the priests were trying to reassure the people of Israel of God's faithfulness at a time when God seemed a long way away and they faced an uncertain future.

And if you would like to know more about how the Hebrew Scriptures came together, let me know and we can explore that more fully in your Bible Study groups.

But let's go back to "walk before" me, Abraham and Sarah - walk in my presence. I will be your God, and you will be the ancestors of many nations. For a couple in their more senior years, well beyond child-bearing age, it must have sounded strange. So strange, and so confronting, perhaps, that Abraham falls on his face - an act of worship.

But this God is intent on drawing Abraham and Sarah into God's covenant, renewing God's relationship with them and inviting them to walk with me in your unknown future.

When have you heard or felt God calling you to walk with God into an unknown future?

Perhaps you could spend some time this week thinking about that and writing your story down?

Then as we turn to Mark's gospel, we need to go back a few verses in chapter 8 to get the full sense of what is going on here.

Jesus' prediction about his death and rebuke of Peter and the whole deny yourself and follow me is spoken after a foundation has been laid. In Mark 8:??, Jesus has asked the disciples a series of questions ending with a defining question - who do you say that I am? Peter leaps in with his affirmation that "You are the Christ"!

And it is only then that Jesus begins to teach about the coming trials and what it will cost them, what it will cost us, to be Jesus' disciples.

The language that Jesus uses here is strong - there is no middle road, there is no taking the slow lane - you are either all in or you are out.

This is one of three times in Mark's gospel where Jesus predicts his death (the others are in chapters 9:30-32 and 10:45). Each of them include the same four elements: suffering, rejection, death and resurrection.

And in all three, the imperative - "the son of man *must*" go through all this - can be interpreted both as a divine imperative, this is how God intends it; or as the suffering being an inevitable outcome or consequence of human power. Either way it names the reality of the human/cosmic conflict.

As Peter is rebuked for his understandable desire to protect his friend and teacher, again the language is strong. But again, we need to be a bit careful in how we understand this "satan" that Jesus refers to - it is the same word as appears in Mark 1 when describing the "tester", and in Mark 4 in the parable of the sower where the seeds are stolen. There is another whole study we could do in understanding what Jesus meant here - but it is enough to say that he is describing a high-grade meddler!

And then... "get behind me". Did you know that the phrase in Greek is the same phrase that is translated in other places as "come follow me"?

Importantly, while the language Jesus uses might be strong, he is not rejecting Peter, rather redirecting him.

Get your eyes back on where God is leading us, Peter.

And then Jesus goes on to spell out what it means to follow him.

If you want to follow me, he says, you will deny yourself, take up your cross and follow" (8: If you want to save your life, you will lose it.

But if you lose your life for my sake and the sake of the gospel, you will find it.

What sort of teaching is this?

It is the sort of teaching that is undoubtedly demanding.

But it has also been misunderstood.

If you have ever heard the call to “deny yourself” to mean that you need to stoically bear suffering or whatever life throws at you and never complain, can I ask you to put that aside. This is the kind of interpretation that leads us to ignore the cry of someone suffering in circumstances of domestic and family violence. This is the kind of interpretation that leads those who are suffering injustice to remain silent. This is not what Jesus meant. If you have ever heard these words to mean that you need to deny your self-identity, I am sorry. If you have ever been told to deny your real self in order to be someone you are not, I weep with you. This is also not what Jesus meant.

In order to deny ourselves, *for the sake of the gospel*, we have to know ourselves. We need to be sure of our identity in Christ as loved and valued children of God - just as you are.

Any relinquishing of self or life is always *for the sake of the gospel*.

And perhaps this is really about liberating us from our obsession with ourselves, our self-absorbed individualism, for the sake of a greater purpose, creation renewed in the love and grace of God.

Put it another way, what Jesus is saying is that when we realise that life is not all about me, and shift our focus to others, then we find the true depth and wonder of life in all its fullness.

God’s call, Christ’s invitation to follow, is always, all about life.

If you feel you are being crushed, then we need to talk.

Perhaps we could ask a question, “will whatever it is I am doing, whatever it is I am denying, will it make me a better disciple?”

God’s call, Christ’s invitation to follow, is always, all about life.

Does that mean it will always be easy? No.

Does it mean it will ever be easy? Probably not.

But it does mean that we take the more difficult path grounded in God’s love for us - sure of who we are and whose we are, just as we are - and living lives that are open to sharing with others, to caring for others, to hanging in there with others, even folk we may not like very much, to learning together and growing together, so that all the world can know and experience the life and the love of God that we know.

This choice is confronting for some people - our friends, our neighbours, our families may not understand, and may be even hostile - as Jesus and the disciples discovered. That’s the cost - but is a cost that others bring to us, not a cost we bring on ourselves.

So as we continue to reflect on God’s covenant, God’s faithfulness, God’s promise; as God invites us to walk in God’s presence; as we turn our eyes towards Jesus and his invitation for us to follow, may you have courage in the face of opposition, and may you know fullness of life as God embraces you.

Rev Kath Merrifield
28 February 2021