**February 25, 2018
A Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent**

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**GOSPEL Mark 8:31-38**

The holy gospel according to Saint Mark, the eighth chapter.

**Glory to you, O Lord.**

31[Jesus] 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.”
  34He 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.”

The gospel of the Lord.

**Praise to you, O Christ.**

Abraham and Sarah…the father and mother of many nations…and of three of the world’s great faith traditions…the ones whose descendants would be as many as the grains of sand in the desert and the stars in the sky…

Their journey with God is truly an epic of the book of Genesis. (Noah, whose story we heard last week, gets about 4 chapters…Abram (who will be renamed Abraham) gets from Genesis 12 through 25…14 chapters of the 50-chapter book…for those out there who like the stats.)

But what does who they were show us about who we are? How does their journey help us understand ours?

Most of us aren’t taken into the desert to receive visions telling us who we are or what we will become…Sometimes it is hard to imagine what it must be like for God to come so close to you…and to be so close to God…that the path ahead becomes as clear as it seemed to be to them.

There are some really important things about them that maybe just have become part of the unquestioned furniture of our memories…but that actually reveal a great deal about how God works in this world. (And for pointing me back to these primary insights, I am grateful to Hebrew Bible scholar Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney.)

First…Abram and Sarai were old. We come to them today part way through their journey…but Abram was 99…and Sarai was 90. And God is telling them that new life will come from them…that God will do a new thing…through them. What many might see as an ending is, for God…and for them…a beginning. We do also hear later that Abraham lived to be 175…so perhaps this was a kind of midlife quest of self-discovery, too…I guess we don’t know. But, speaking for myself, after two weeks of watching teenagers accomplish the most impressive physical feats of which the human body is capable…it makes me feel better that God chooses a middle-aged couple to begin a journey that changes the world.

And while we’re on the topic of the Olympics…and unlikely heroes…I’m not sure if you had this experience...but I am just now recovering from a condition I seem to come down with every four years…where for about two weeks I care deeply about the sport of curling. I forget about it entirely in the intervening years. But, for a few weeks it seems strangely important.

This year, of course, curling enthusiasts in the U.S. got the rollercoaster ride of watching their men’s team struggle through to gold medal victory…and many heard the story of this team…and especially John Shuster…who was basically kicked out of the national curling club after poor performances…and pulled together other players to build what he has referred to as Team Reject.

They fought their way back to getting respect. And now Team Reject has Olympic gold.

I don’t know if Abram and Sarai are quite like that…but they are not the most likely suspects to be chosen for positions of power or importance in God’s plan to redeem the world. But now they have new names and an identity forever as the ancestors of many nations…as chosen ones of God.

Another thing we need to remember about them is how very imperfect they were. We may be inclined to brush off things that were normal in their time, even if we now know them to be wrong…but maybe we shouldn’t. Abraham and Sarah had slaves…owned other human beings…and didn’t always treat them well. They sexually exploited Hagar…and Abraham was even willing to exploit his own wife to provide cover and protect himself.

They were bold and brave and faithful…and they were also selfish, doubtful and cruel. God’s story is not about the best people in the world being picked by God based on their moral merit badges…God’s story is about people who are chosen by God to bless the world and make it more good…even as they themselves become more who God would want them to be. As a mantra of my high school youth group went…God doesn’t call the qualified. God qualifies the called. And God will always be choosing the least, the rejected, the imperfect, the oppressed…because God is doing a new thing that the powers of this world still do not understand.

So today, I hope you find faith to say to your own internal narratives of self-doubt, criticism, inadequacy or fear….a resounding “no!” Or, if you don’t have that within you today, then hear it now. Because as it was true for our ancestors Abraham and Sarah, it is true for you.

No. It’s not too late for you to be who you are meant to be.

No. You are not too old. No. You are not too undeserving.

No. You don’t have to accept the small sufferings of every day as inevitable…or the large struggles of this world as hopeless.

No. We don’t have to accept the small stings inflicted on ourselves or others day by day for our weight, gender, age, sexual orientation, or race.

No. We don’t have to accept a global hunger crisis…or refugee crisis…as regrettable but inevitable. No. We don’t have to send our thoughts and prayers again and again and again and think that is all that we can do about the epidemic of gun violence in our society.

Yes. There can be more. Yes. There *is* more.

It is with the freedom of Abraham and Sarah that we can be bold in our own growth and work in this world…not because we have done it so well so far. Sometimes we haven’t. Sometimes they didn’t. But we don’t have to be afraid of our failures and build fortresses of defensiveness and self-justification. We can, in fact, say out loud that we are growing and changing and learning and failing and trying again…We can listen with our whole hearts…We can live bravely in our vulnerabilities and become closer to one another. Because it is never too late and we are never too unworthy for God to draw us into God’s covenant and purpose.

We know from the way that Jesus leads us in Lent that the purposes of God will not always be easy to live out. In fact, it will be the hardest thing we do. But we know…that in that kind of struggle made holy by God’s presence within our limited humanity…we are often are truest selves.

So, I pray that you trust in God’s purpose for you today. I pray that the struggles you face will be holy ones. And I pray that God’s covenant continue to shape this whole human family – all of us, descendants of our ancestors Sarah and Abraham…so that the whole world might be blessed.

May it be so. Amen.