

LENT 2B, February 28, 2021 – Rev. Seth D. Jones

“Multitudes of Nations”

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Romans 4:13-25

Today, we are examining God's covenant with Abraham and how it relates to our sense of community as a church and as followers of Jesus.

God is promising Abraham, who is 99 years old here, that he will be the ancestor to descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky (ref: Genesis 15).

Abraham responds to this by bursting out laughing, as if to say,

“You cannot be serious, God! Sarah herself is 90 years old.

But hey, you know, you're God, so have at it.”

Sarah herself laughs when the visiting angels tell her the same thing (Gen 18).

But God does indeed make it happen.

The impossible becomes reality.

Remember Jesus' words when the disciples were unable to heal a possessed man's child:

“With humanity it is impossible, but not with God. With God, all things are possible.”

Do we believe that?

Do we believe God will accomplish great things
and apparently impossible things?

Or do we give up on the promises of God because of the
prevailing attitudes surrounding us?

Let us remember who Abraham is.

Abraham is considered the “Father of the Faith” in three world religions – Judaism, Islam and Christianity.

By statements of faith in all three traditions, it is faithfully acknowledged that the promise to Abraham of descendants as many as stars and grains of sand has already come to pass.

There are now 4.2 billion people in the world who would be considered a faith descendant of Abraham now - 14.7 million Jewish people, 1.8 million Muslims, and 2.3 billion Christians.

But let us consider Abraham himself.

Abraham is a lone believer.

He is the first true monotheist, the first true believer in one and only one God.

All around Abraham are various tribal religions worshiping local deities and pantheons of gods in the heavens. And yet here is a man making claims about the one true God, who is laying claim to territories and future generations based on promises made by that one God.

Abraham, by the strength of God's prevailing desire and God's initial contact,
contrary to
all the attitudes,
all the myths and morality tales surrounding him,
all the simplistic worldviews,

Abraham makes the great leap of faith.

That leap was based on a profound trust in God.

Paul says in Romans,

18 In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, "So shall your offspring be." 19 He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. 20 No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, 21 fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

In Paul's time, the people of the faith of Abraham perceived themselves to be the sole inheritors of God's promise to Abraham.

Paul saw a deep contradiction to this idea in a single phrase from Scripture. In that one verse lies the problem with the exclusive claims to God's promise to Abraham, a promise meant for the whole world, not just a single group of people.

Genesis 15 says,

4 And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." 5 And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him,

"So shall your offspring be."

6 And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

The difficulty, the contradiction for Paul lies in the very last line.

"Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord counted it to Abraham as righteousness."

What makes Abraham and all his descendants participants in the promises of God, inheritors of God's covenant?

Is it the right following of the laws of God?

If it were that, Scripture would have told us that.

But that is not what it says.

What it says is that God credits Abraham as righteous because of his faith.

Abraham is worthy of the promises of God because of his faith in God, not because he followed the rules God set out before him.

We, and everyone else, become descendants of Abraham by faith in God's promises and covenants, that God will do what God said God would do, not by adherence to a particular creed, a particular law or a particular code of conduct, but by faith.

Martin Luther believed that the sole purpose for the law was that it pushed us into an awareness of our complete dependence on God and thus the utter need we each have for Jesus Christ.

Luther understands:

that God imparts righteousness, purity, freedom from sin by faith alone,

by our sharing in the same mind as Christ and also the same mind as Abraham - Christ alone.

In other words, we are freed by our faith in God, by God's grace alone.

We are given hope by our sole reliance on God, in accordance to Scripture alone.

We are made whole by living only for God's glory and that alone - God's glory alone.

The power of faith in our ability to participate in God's covenant with us comes from this recognition of where our righteousness and acceptance by God comes from - not from us, but from God.

Paul, in Romans, by way of Abraham, reorients our thinking away from adherence to rules and the law to the presence and provisions of God for us.

Paul redirects us to understand that God is speaking to and for all people. So let me take a moment and flip this whole thing around.

We normally consider this passage as it directly relates to Abraham.

But the focus is on Abraham's descendants, not primarily Abraham.

That focus includes us.

It was also Jesus' focus – us, I mean.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says,

“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

Jesus is recasting the promise of God to Abraham.

Those who are drawn up into Christ – all people everywhere – are the descendants of Abraham.

And again, when speaking to the disciples, Jesus says,

“By this all people will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”
If the followers of Christ love one another, all people will know God by way of Jesus Christ.

In other words, those who have faith in Jesus Christ will have the righteousness of Abraham imparted to them precisely because of their faith, in exactly the same way Abraham was reckoned to be righteous before God.

The focus is always on “all people”.

All people who claim faith in God are descendants of Abraham.

Or another way to think of this is that

*all people are either already members of the family who call Abraham the father of their faith – your family;
or they are waiting to be welcomed and invited into the family who claim Abraham as the father of their faith.*

What do we do with this?

Now that I have made this claim –

that everyone you meet is either a member of the family of Abraham by faith, or are awaiting to be welcomed and invited into that family – so what?

I think knowing this – that we share a family with Abraham – matters in how we view other people.

The issue Paul had with the religious view of his day and age, what the faith of Abraham and Jacob and David had turned into, was that it turned a world-wide possibility of fellowship by way of Abraham into an exclusive and rigid members-only club.

But Paul knows, by the example and witness of Jesus Christ, that we worship a God who

“gives life to the dead and calls into existence those things which do not exist”.

A God who does such things,

a Lord of all Life who raises a Son from the dead in Resurrection for our sake, is not a God who forms members-only clubs.

Grace and steadfast love,

which are the inherent nature of God, by their very definition,

must be inclusive.

God's creation is a testimony and a witness to the vast diversity God takes pleasure in from the beginning of creation.

Why would that diversity be any different for the people whom God seeks to be part of Abraham's extended family?

Jesus' sole command to the disciples was to love one another.
In the Beatitudes, Jesus tells us to love our enemies as well.
Diversity in humanity means we must learn to love
that which we agree with and that which we do not,
that which looks like us and that which does not look like us,
that which attracts and that which offends.

If a family, as the easily falsifiable saying goes, is the place
where they always have to take you in,
then church is the place where we must learn to
love those whom we would rather not.

There is a celebration song for Kwanzaa called “*Nia*”, written by Glenn Burleigh.
Glenn Burleigh is a composer and pianist from Oklahoma and I recommend him to all
of you.

The song

“*Nia*”, which means ‘*purpose*’, begins with the question,
“*Why was I born?*”

The lyrics then answer in several ways:

“*Was it to feed the poor?*”

“*Was it to preach the Gospel?*” and several others.

The answer to the question, “*Why was I born?*” though, is,

“*To love God with my heart and my mind and my soul and to love my neighbor*”.

It is an incredibly simple and astute answer to the question.

I tell you this because this covenant with Abraham,
this living into the family of God from generation to generation,
is clarifying.

It is clarifying because

what all this diversity of creation,

what all these billions of people who surround us in this world,

what all that God has done for us through Jesus Christ,

what all that diversity calls us to

is what Burleigh's choir piece

calls us to:

*to love God with all our heart and our minds and our souls
and our strength
and our neighbors as ourselves.*

We love all of them –

the person whom you do not know out there

and the person you do know in here –
because, by God's covenant with Abraham,
those people are either already one of Abraham's descendants by faith,
or they are waiting to be invited and welcomed into the family of Abraham.

We know these things by the power of faith in Jesus Christ,
our Lord and Savior.

We, by the same leap of faith made by Abraham, believe in the promises and the future
God holds for us.

We know, because of God's covenant with Abraham, God is seeking at all times
Abraham's descendants.

Jesus is doing this work even now, in our midst.

Jesus invites us.

Jesus welcomes us.

Jesus hopes for us and prays for us.

Jesus seeks us.

Jesus wants us to be a descendant of his family,
just as Jesus himself is a descendant of Abraham's family.

The leap of faith Abraham makes is for God and God alone,
but in making that leap,

Abraham also makes the leap for all of humanity.

By having faith in God,

Abraham invites and welcomes all those who follow in his footsteps into that faith.

It is a profound act of love,

on God's part and on Abraham's part.

Contrary to all hope –

Abraham is over one hundred and Sarah is almost 100 when Isaac is born –

Abraham hopes in God and God alone.

Confronted with the impossible,

Abraham trusts in God and God alone.

In the face of the absurd,

Abraham believes in God's promises and God's future for him

and all who follow in Abraham's path.

For those of you who have made the commitment to faith in God's promises,

how will you

invite,

welcome,

hope for,

pray for

and seek out those whom God loves,
those whom Jesus is already drawing to himself?
For those of you who have not made the commitment to follow Christ, know right now
that we,

broken sinners that we are,

invite you,

welcome you,

hope for you

and pray for you

so that you might make the great leap of faith which Abraham has made,

the great promise we are fulfilling even now

by the calling, power and blessings of Jesus Christ.

By God's glory, and by the power of the Holy Spirit,

may we always be held in God's promises

and follow in the footsteps of the fathers of our faith,

Abraham and Jesus Christ.

Amen.