

Second Sunday in Lent
February 28, 2021
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Promise me. Do you promise?

As a younger priest, I learned how important it is for the ministers of the church to visit nursing homes and assisted living facilities.

In my first parish assignment, I was blessed to visit with the elderly women and men who lived in those communities.

There is one woman who stands out in my mind. Almost every time I went to visit, her daughter was visiting with her too. So, the three of us would chat, then we'd pray together, share a passage of scripture, and be nourished by Holy Communion.

When it came time for me to leave, the older woman would grab me by the hand and say with all seriousness: "Promise me you will come back." Then she'd squeeze my hand and repeat, "Promise me."

Her daughter received the same message. Her mother would grab her hand and say: "Promise you'll come back. Do you promise?"

Her daughter later told me why her mother was so insistent on that promise. Her husband had been killed in World War II. His body was found far from his unit. Somehow, he'd gotten separated from his fellow soldiers. And his wife, who was now elderly, was always haunted by the thought that her husband had died alone, isolated. Now she was frightened of the same thing. So she was insistent: "Promise me you will come back."

Years later, dementia had robbed this woman of her memories. The day before she died, I went to her room, and led her family in prayer. The older woman didn't seem to recognize any of us.

But as her daughter leaned over to give her mother a kiss, the look of recognition came across her face. And then she declared: "You came back, just like you promised!"

Such joy – joy because of a promise made, and a promise kept.

Our God is a promise maker, and a promise keeper. And that can become the source of our joy!

Today, in the Book of Genesis, we encounter Abram and Sarai – and they have heard powerful promises from God.

Their amazing story begins in Genesis 12. Abram is 75 years old when God directs him to pack up his wife, family and portable possessions, to follow God wherever God leads.

And as part of that invitation to leave the familiar to undertake this adventure, God makes an astounding promise to Abram and Sarai. They've never had any children. Yet God promises that they will become the parents of a nation. What a promise!

This couple was barren up to this point, yet now God declares: "Your descendants will be numerous." We'd assume that such a promise would bring them joy...

Yet as we keep reading the Book of Genesis, God keeps repeating this promise to Abram and Sarai. And you begin to wonder – are Abram and Sarai listening? Or in some way, are they like the woman in the nursing home – grabbing on to God's hand and insisting, "Do you really promise? Do you promise?"

In Chapter 13, God repeats his promise: "I will make your descendants so numerous that they cannot be counted!"

In Chapter 15 – God's promise becomes a covenant. Abram wonders if perhaps one of his servants will inherit everything. So God repeats the promise again... "your descendants will be numerous, like the stars in the sky."

God keeps promising. "You will have children. I will make this happen." But in chapter 16, Abram and Sarai appear to be dissatisfied with God's timing. You can almost picture them looking up to heaven and saying, "We're not getting any younger, you know!"

True - God has repeated his promise over and over again. But they decide to take matters into their own hands. Sarai encourages Abram to be intimate with her maidservant, Hagar. That's certainly one way to have a child. What could go wrong with that plan?

So God has to intervene. And... once again! ... God repeats his promise to Abram and Sarai. You will have numerous descendants!

Which brings us to the passage that we read on this second Sunday of Lent.

And if I asked you to guess what God is up to in this chapter, by now you'd probably get the right answer. Yes! God, once again, makes a covenant promise to Abram and Sarai. You WILL have a child! Your descendants WILL be numerous.

I promise. I really promise.

The living God makes transformative promises to Abram and Sarai in today's passage. God says:

- + I am God almighty.
- + I will make my covenant with you
- + This is my covenant – I have made you, and I shall make you, the ancestor of a multitude of nations
- + you will be fruitful, and Sarai shall bear a son

Such beautiful, transformative promises. All the more remarkable because God has been making these promises, repeating these promises, over and over again since chapter 12.

But this time, in chapter 17, Abram and Sarai are so transformed by their encounter with this promise-making, promise-keeping God, that they are apparently changed to the core of their being. How do I know? Because their names are changed!

So often in the Bible, when someone has a life-changing encounter with the living God, their names get changed. In the Biblical world, your name represents your identity and your destiny. So if you have an encounter with God – an encounter that changes who you are and what your destiny is – then your name changes.

Jacob encounters God, and his name becomes Israel.
Saul encounters the Risen Christ, and his name becomes Paul.
Simon becomes Peter.

The name Abram means ‘exalted father.’ But the name Abraham means “father of a multitude.” His name tells us his destiny. The name Sarai means ‘princess.’ The name Sarah is a subtle shift in that meaning, indicating that she is the princess of many.

God has promised – God is acting through this couple to create a people who will become the blessing through which God saves the world. And in chapter 17, God eloquently repeats that promise in a way that transforms Abraham and Sarah.

As I read chapters 12 through 17 of the Book of Genesis, I am struck by the fact that God keeps repeating his covenant promise to Abraham and Sarah. Yet Abraham and Sarah behave as if they’re they are not always listening to God when he promises; or they apparently think it is up to them to help God figure out how to fulfill his promise!

God promises – Abraham and Sarah, YOU will have a child! Yet Abraham suggests, maybe we’ll just have to ‘count’ my servant and my heir.

God promises – Abraham and Sarah, YOU will have a child. And Sarah suggested: let’s have Hagar give birth, and count Ishmael as our heir.

God keeps promising. But Abraham and Sarah... do they doubt? Don’t they trust? If God is speaking so clearly, why does God have to keep repeating himself?

Or, is it possible that, on many occasions, Abraham and Sarah are not listening to the promise-making God. Sure, they hear his words... sometimes. But is it also possible that, at other times, they are listening, not to God, but to the voice of their own fears? Don’t they seem almost haunted by a fear that God cannot or will not fulfill this amazing promise he’s made. Sure, God says it... but his timing is too slow. Sure God promises... but maybe we’ll have to work out the details.

When they listen to the authentic voice of God, they hear promises that transform Abraham and Sarah to their core. When they listen to their own fears and doubts, they seem to panic, concluding that the God of the universe can't do what he promises.

But in the next chapter of Genesis, the promise-making God sends three messengers to Abraham and Sarah, with the announcement that the birth of the long-promised son is immanent. Promises made. Promises kept. A God who can be trusted.

In the fullness of time, God sent HIS only son, fulfilling promises God made through the prophets. And throughout his preaching ministry, Jesus makes remarkable promises. Promises so transformative that they will change US to our core.

And perhaps the question that Abraham and Sarah faced is the question we face as well. Will we listen to Jesus as he makes these promises, trusting that he will do what he promised? Or are we going to listen to our fears and worries?

Listen to what Jesus said:

+ Come to me, all who labor, and I will give you rest. A promise made. A promise kept.

Jesus said: My joy will be in you, and your joy will be complete. A promise made. A promise kept.

Jesus said: Your sins are forgiven. A promise made. A promise kept.

Jesus said: If you remain in me, you will bear much fruit. A promise made. A promise kept.

Jesus said: I am the bread of life. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. A promise made. A promise kept.

Jesus said: The son of man will be crucified, and on the third day he will rise. A promise made. A promise kept.

Jesus said: Behold I am with you always. A promise made. A promise kept.

The promises made by the Son of God will change us to the core, IF listen to them.

He said it. He'll do it. He promises...

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