

MARCH 8, 2009  
LENT 2  
“PROMISES, PROMISES”

Let us pray: Gracious God, give us the courage to “let go” of our lives and our religious need to “save ourselves” that in “losing” and “loosing” ourselves in trust of you we may be truly found and saved. It’s in Jesus’ name that I pray. Amen.

Two weeks ago our Gospel reading began, “*six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John and went up a high mountain apart*” and then follows the story of Jesus’ transfiguration with the Voice from the cloud commanding, “*This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!*” The “six days” **before** then alluded to is today’s story which also involves Peter in a supporting actor role in which Jesus astoundingly ends up calling Peter “Satan.” The Hebrew word means “adversary” or “enemy” from the root “to obstruct” or

“oppose.” Imagine, it’s as if Jesus is telling the future pope, “You devil! Go to hell where you belong!” —the strongest words of rebuke, I’d say, we ever hear from Jesus’ lips. They’re really cuss words: “Go to hell Peter, you Satan, you obstructor, you enemy of the Gospel—you Devil!”

And then Jesus goes a step further to explain just why he got so hot so fast as he says: “*For you are setting your mind not on divine things—God’s things—but on human things.*” You’re captive to a merely human way of thinking rather than God’s way—God’s perspective—God’s ‘habit of mind.’ What triggered Jesus’ angry words to Peter, as we heard, was the turning point in Mark’s Gospel where Jesus had begun to teach his disciples how he as God’s Messiah, God’s anointed, “*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*” —Jesus’ first passion prophecy. But Peter wouldn’t hear it. He hadn’t left his

fish nets and family to follow some failed Messiah, someone headed for the kind of end Jesus was predicting for himself. And so, Mark says, “*Peter took him (Jesus) aside and began to rebuke him.*” The word “rebuke” means “scolded” or more literally “disrespected” Jesus. Peter, the impetuous leader of the disciples, took it upon himself to “set Jesus’ straight,” scolding him for being so negative and defeatist. “Buck up Jesus,” Peter seems to be saying. “*But turning and looking at his disciples,*” Mark says, “*Jesus rebuked Peter and said,*” “*Get behind me Satan,*” “I won’t have any of your Satanism!,” your seeing things from a merely human point of view.

Funny thing is, Peter should’ve known better. As both our first and second readings for today demonstrate, as a child of God’s covenant with Israel made with old Father Abraham and Mother Sarah, as an inheritor of the covenant of old, Peter should’ve known better. Or maybe better, I should say, great-great grandfather Abraham, (for

as our text from Genesis 17 says, Abraham was already 99 years old when God's promise came to him that he and Sarah (no spring chicken herself) would become the progenitors of a multitude of nations—a progeny more numerous than the stars in the heavens and the grains of sand on the seashore—an announcement, the next chapter of Genesis recounts, that struck Sara as more than a little bit funny so that she couldn't help but laugh at the very incongruity of it all—she a barren old woman, with a womb-full of new life.

She laughed, as St. Paul writes remembering this story in today's second reading, perhaps not only considering the barrenness of her own womb, but Paul also refers to Abraham in these words that I always find at once both pathetic and more than a little funny. Paul writes:

*He (Abraham) did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as*

*dead (for he was about a 100 years old) or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb.*

I love that throw-away reference of Paul's to old Abe's nearly century-old body "which was already as good as dead," because it so heightens the risibility—the sheer ridiculousness—of the whole situation—the risible situation out of which God's covenant is given birth. This is the "setting your mind on divine things rather than human things" to which Jesus is referring by calling Peter "Satan." The incongruous, utterly unexpected, contrary-to-all-expectations—sometimes downright ridiculous—ways in which God chooses to act.

The great contemporary Christian scholar of the Hebrew Bible, Walter Bruegemann, puts it this way:

*We are not speaking of a big, spectacular miracle—a very particular miracle that stands at the center of our world—but a little, local one. We can name*

*it, and we cling to it tenaciously. It goes like this—in its embarrassment.*

*Our faith-father, Abraham, was a very old man. His wife, Sarah, our faith-mother, was equally old and they could not have a child. All their hopes, all God's promises, the whole story, hinged on a child to inherit, but none was given.*

*But as the story goes, God has more faith, more resilience, more confidence in a possible future than does Abraham or Sarah. Then inexplicably this yearned-for, unexpected, desperately wanted baby is born, not of normal human circumstance, but of the power and fidelity of God. This birth is an event-defining explanation, resisting reason. Abraham and Sarah and all of us are thrown back from reason and understanding to the more elemental responses of wonder...astonishment...amazement...gratitude...praise...and laughter. In that moment of birth and thanksgiving Israel has broken free from all the bonds of reasonable control and*

*technical prediction. There is only the **dance of faith** that does not ask for explanation.*

*From that moment on, Israel lives by the **inexplicable that evokes gratitude**. What Israel sees of God's oddness is not craziness, but **powerful faithfulness** which can keep promises against all odds. Biblical faith (Bruegemann concludes) is grounded in **God's capacity to keep promises**. In that moment Israel comes to know everything that needs to be known about God and about the world and about us. We live in a world of **surplus surprises** that outrun our capacity to control or predict or explain."*

St. Paul, in our second reading for today, gives that little bunch of harried Christians in Rome what Bruegemann calls "*a most eloquent extrapolation*" of this ancient story of two old fogies giving birth in their dotage to God's outrageous promise, from which will flow God's continuing outrageous promises of well being for all time to come. Paul and the church of all times and places including us gathered here today are custodians, stewards, inheritors of that original promise and the subsequent

promises to which it gave birth—God’s **covenant**, Scripture calls it—God’s promise through Israel culminating in the life, death and resurrection of yet another child born under strange and trying circumstances, a child who grown to adulthood, would, as Jesus warned Peter, discover his destiny by God to include “*great suffering, rejection by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes*” and finally death—humiliating death, a criminal’s execution really—at the hands of the political authorities.

This is precisely what Peter didn’t want to hear—wouldn’t hear—and even rebuked Jesus for daring to suggest—precisely an act of “bad faith.” But the way of the cross, Jesus said, is somehow God’s way and the way of the promise—a promise that carries with it the peculiar assurance that “*those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake and the Gospel’s will save it.*” An odd promise indeed! On the face of it no more credible—or even desirable-- than that promise

given old Abraham and Sarah back there at the beginning of the story.

And yet, as Paul says, *“for this reason it depends on **faith**, in order that the promise may rest on **grace**.”* *“No **distrust**,”* Paul says, *“made Abraham waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God being fully convinced that **God was able to do what God had promised.**”*

“Clinging to the promises of God” in all contingencies, Martin Luther would later paraphrase Paul’s words, is the definition of faith, clinging to God’s promises even when our trust in God is put to the test, remembering always that most horrible and horrifying story that’s also there in the Abraham saga—of God’s inexplicable call to Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac—the child of the promise—as a way of testing and trying the depth of Abraham’s faith. And so you see, this clinging to the promise is no “walk in the park,” but it’s a life and death matter, paradoxically a “letting go” rather than a “hanging on,” of our normal human hopes—what Paul would call Abraham’s

“*hope against hope,*” what I like to call “hope beyond all our human hopefulness” — tried and tested hope that “lets go” in order to “let God.”

Can you imagine such faith? Not can you manufacture it. Not can you earn it. Not can you cooperate with God so as to experience it. Not even can you receive it. “Yes I can” has nothing to do with it. That’s the “letting go” part and even “letting go” is in no way “my work.” Letting go even of the desire, the need, the religious impulse to want to “save ourselves”, as Jesus said, is all a part of God’s way of reaching into our lives and saving us by giving us the grace to let go and let God reign in our lives. As Walter Brueggemann puts it: “*Can you entrust possibilities to God that go beyond your own capacity for control and fabrication?*”

By God’s grace alone are we able to respond: “Yes, I can imagine” — for I have Abraham and Sarah and all the subsequent story of faith to serve as God’s mind-blowing Word of grace that makes the impossible possible — a Word that shatters my complacency and my natural religiosity and my moralism, a Word

that calls into question even my sense of justice and my acts of compassion, a Word that sets my mind on divine things rather than human things, a Word that becomes tangible for me in the communal meal of bread and wine we share together, taking Jesus at his Word that this is his body and his blood of the new covenant.

*“Such imagination requires a dying and yields utterly new life,”* Bruegemann concludes, as Peter himself—that one-time Devil and future denier—so clearly shows us. Thank God for the gift of grace through faith that makes such imagining and such new beginnings possible.

The peace that passes understanding keep our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.