

“Reading Between the Lines”

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Genesis 17:1-7, 15-26

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

God said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I 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.' Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, 'Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?' And Abraham said to God, 'O that Ishmael might live in your sight!' God said, 'No, but your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year.' And when he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham.

Then Abraham took his son Ishmael and all the slaves born in his house or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him. Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. And his son Ishmael was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised;

Mark 8:27-38

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection

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

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

Will you pray with me? Gracious God, your word is the Living Word. It calls to us. It speaks to us. Sometimes it makes us uncomfortable. So today, as we wrestle, may your Spirit lead us, teach us, and open our hearts to your truth for us. Amen.

I guess I'll begin by saying when I started preparing for this sermon I felt like a wondering Aramaean, a phrase used to describe the earliest ancestors of our faith who went from place to place. I too was wandering and wondering from one place to another trying to figure out where I would end up, but then I realized maybe that is the point of this passage. Life is a journey and for us, the journey is about life and faith and it involves a lot of movement and sometimes wondering what's going on.

What struck me as I read the Genesis passage is the patterns in this reading that are woven together with other parts of this book. When you read the chapters about Abraham it becomes very apparent that similar strands of his story are repeated in silently different ways telling us of the movement in the deepening relationship between God and Abraham. So given my love of alliteration, we're going to journey through Genesis focusing on the adventures of Abraham.

I shouldn't be a surprise to us that we find certain stories repeated in the scriptures. That certainly happens in the gospel readings. For example, the feeding of the multitude occurs several times in the gospel each one with different nuances shaped by the different writer. Biblical research shows that the stories of Genesis are woven together into one book based on oral history shared by a number of authors. Those scholars who've studied the book noticed over time there was a changes in patterns and vocabulary changes that made them realize different people were writing different parts. One of the easiest ways to see that is when we look at how a writer would use the name for God. This shows up in the very beginning of Genesis with the two creation stories. In chapter one, the one who was called the creator begins with birds and sea creatures and ends with humans. Here the creator is called God. In the second story of creation, Adam is created by the breath of the one the called the Lord God and other creatures follow.

When I walked through the earlier chapters of Genesis I noticed some other patterns. There's a trilogy of banishments and genealogies. Starting with Adam and Eve and the banishment from the Garden of Eden to a genealogy that's followed by Noah and the destructive flood that banished people. More genealogy follows and then there is the Tower of Babel and people are scattered and can no longer understand one another. And then another genealogy. Each of those sections tells us about people of faith-testing their relationship with God. But when we arrive at Abraham's story, something shifts. It moves from genealogy to theology and it marks the first conversation between God and Abraham the first of what are called divine speeches.

God tells Abram to take Sarai and leave all that they know to go to Canaan. God offers a promise of protection and place and people. So they do gather everything they have and they go forth in an act of trust and hope. Now, I find that very interesting because it reflects a change in the understanding of the gods of those days. In that time, gods were considered local. You would worship and make offerings to a god of your locale. But we learn that this God is different. This God is going to go with them wherever they go. And it reminds us that this God is a God who is universal, is with us everywhere. As the chapters unfold, Abram and Sarah journey forth again and again. They go to Canaan and there's a famine, so they go to Egypt. And there is no child. They are ordered out of Egypt and they journey again. And there is no child. Over the years, the size of the flocks of Lot and Abram grow and grazing land becomes an issue. So Abram suggests to Lot that he take one area and Abram will take the other part. And still, there is no child. Sarai takes matters into her own hands and gives her servant Hagar to her husband, and Ishmael is born. God speaks to Abram again about the promises of protection and place and people. Again, God says there will be a son. But not Ishmael. It is to be a child from Sarah. Years pass, and still no child.

But then, we arrive at this morning's reading. Abram is 99 years old, and God is saying something different. First of all, God is called by a different name, El Shaddai. We're not fully sure of its meaning, but how it is translated is

"I am God Almighty." The word appears to have some connection with the mountains, which makes sense given the role of mountains with Moses and other events in the Bible. And El Shaddai says, "Walk before me and be blameless." Adam falls on his face before God in an act of worship and humility. It seems to me the phrase, "Walk before me," is different. Different than those times when God has simply said imperatively, "Go." This word for walk, walk before me, is the same one used to talk about the Lord God walking in the Garden of Eden. This is more of an invitation. It's not just an action, "go." It's a relationship. The other phrase, "To be blameless," means "to be wholly dedicated to God". **D** Not to be perfect, but to know to whom you belong. But in this passage, it's not only God's name that changes. So does Abram's. For God says, "You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but you shall be called Abraham. For I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make nations of you and kings will come from you." Now, Abraham's family named him Abram, which means esteemed one. But now he is named by God, and the name means "father of the people, of a multitude."

I think in this passage we find that Abraham and God become more deeply connected. Abraham essentially becomes a new creation, the patriarch of a people. God gives Sarai a new name as well. She, too, becomes a new creation. She will be called Sarah, and it's a word rooted in royalty. She will be called this because her lineage will now include royalty. Then God ends the passage by telling Abraham that Sarah will bear a child. And what does Abraham do? He laughs. In fact, he falls down laughing, it says. And who can blame him? He's probably thinking, "Okay, God. I've heard this before. And now I'm 99." But if you read the next chapter, you see how these two are connected. It's a foreshadowing of the more familiar chapter. Remember, in chapter 18 Abraham has three people who show up unexpectedly, and they rush around to get everything ready to feed them. They share with him that Sarah will have a child. In chapter 18, in this version, Sarah laughs. But really, it is God who has the last laugh, for God tells them what to name their child, as well. God tells them to call him Isaac, which means, "He laughs." I think it's a reminder of the surprising joy of his birth, and the fulfilment of the promise of God.

So these stories weave in and out together, deeply connected, foreshadowing, remembering, going back and forth. In this morning's chapter, the authors are called the priestly writers. they are people who have a special concern, as they shape this story. They live in the years after the fall of Jerusalem. They are part of a people in exile who are now living in a foreign land and they wanted to go home again. These authors, the priestly writers, were so worried that the stories and traditions of the faith might not live on. So they preserved them in this story of Abraham and Sarah. For this story becomes a bridge from the past to their present and offers them hope. Because consider how long Abraham and Sarah waited. Consider all the journeys they made trusting that no matter what, and no matter where, God was still with them.

There's one other part of this story that's not read from the lectionary passage. But I think they're important because they connect us to our tradition. God tells Abraham about a new ritual, a rite of circumcision, and that everyone from him and every other male born into the household is to be circumcised. It becomes a sign that they are part of the covenant, and one that they are all to share in.

So we take all these aspects of chapter 17, and we say, "What does this mean for us, in the midst of Lent?" On one level, I think it is about patience, and waiting for the promises of God, and the promise that God is with us even when we may not sense it. But it echoes the traditions of our faith. One is the baptism. We have baptism to mark the beginning of a special relationship with God. So it's not surprising that our names are specifically included in the words of baptism. It's a reminder we are named and claimed by God. It marks each of us as a child of a covenant, a child who belongs to God.

The other thing is that it echoes the story and aspect of journey in our lives. Lent is a journey of reflection and self-examination, but faith itself is a journey. It may not mean leaving a particular place, but taking on something that makes us uncomfortable and is new. We don't stand still in faith. If we do, our faith dries up. To listen for God's call is to journey forth in new ways, and to be willing to risk and be courageous.

The opening words that God speaks to Abraham and Sarah are this. "I am God Almighty. Walk before me and be blameless." It is not just a command, it is an invitation. To walk with God is to be one who follows God, and goes on the journey trusting that God is there. And I found myself thinking of Psalm 23. "The Lord is my Shepherd, who walks with us, from familiar places to unfamiliar places and back again, from still waters to green pastures. Even in the valley of the shadow of death, we say, '*For thou art with me*'."

Lent is a time for us, then, to consider the ways in which we have been less faithful, and it's also a time to figure out the ways we can become more blameless. Now, blameless does not mean perfection. It's a Hebrew word, *Tamim*. It is about deepening our faith. It is about becoming more faithful, more wholly dedicated to God. It is a reminder that if we walk with God, if we journey with God, we're probably heading in the right direction.

Lent is a journey of faith, a movement into new places. Some are uncomfortable. Some are not. But all are important. In this morning's reading, we are reminded of the importance of deepening our relationship with God, to walk more faithfully with God, because we are those named and claimed by God as children of a covenant. You belong to God. Amen.

1) From What It Means To Be "blameless" Before God, Part 29 on the website Discovertheword.com.