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Genesis 17:1-7,15-16; Mark 8:31-38

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***Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16***

***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. 2And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” 3Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, 4“As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. 5No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. 6I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. 7I 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. (not in lectionary) 8And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding, and I will be their God.” 9God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. 10This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. 11You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. 12Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring. 13Both the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money must be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. 14Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”***

***15God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. 16I 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.” (not in lectionary) 17Then 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?” 18And Abraham said to God, “O that Ishmael might live in your sight!” 19God 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. 20As 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. 21But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year.” 22And when he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham.***

***Mark 8:31-38***

***31Then 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. 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.”***

Today is the second of six Sundays that the church calendar has decided to name the season of Lent. I thought it might be helpful to talk about the other seasons of the church calendar, to put the season of Lent into perspective.

If we start with Christmas, because, you know, presents! Before I ever knew that there was a God, church, religious part of Christmas, there were presents! When we speak of Christmas in terms of the church calendar we are not talking about just one day. Christmas has its own season. After the 12 days of Christmas we come to the season of Epiphany, the season when the scripture we read is all about the many revelations of Christ – Jesus’ appearances to gentiles, his humanity, his divinity. And then, after we learn about Christ’s divinity, we begin a season of learning about what that means for Jesus to be divine, to be the Messiah. That season is where we are now. What it means for Jesus to be divine, is that Jesus will have to die in order to fulfill the divine work that he was sent to do. That work culminates in the scripture traditions that we call Easter. The Lenten season was often a season of preparation for baptism, for those who were new to following Christ. That preparation consisted of teaching about who Christ was, what Christ said, what his ministry meant, and how and why he died.

Every church season by now is full of traditions that came from earlier traditions that came from even earlier traditions, etc. Today the season of Lent has come to symbolize many things. For some it is a very dour season of the church year where we focus on the unjust death of Jesus and the guilt of horrible humanity who sent Jesus to his death, by being so bad that God felt like God needed to come down personally to set us straight. For others, it’s a season where you change some bad habits for six weeks and go back to them right after Easter, because really, it’s about the joy of Easter all along. One extreme can be a form of emotional manipulation, and the other extreme requires no investment from the heart.

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My belief is that all religion is ultimately about one’s relationship with God in community. God needs to have a relationship with us as individuals in order to create a community of God. And we as individuals fulfill our relationship with God in community. Without an investment from the heart God’s love falls on dry ground. Without an investment from the heart, the love of God in Christ means nothing.

Our focus for the season of Lent here at Bethany this year is focusing on the covenants God has made with different individuals and communities from the beginning of our Biblical history. Today I want to focus on the solid foundation God brings us, by making these covenants with us. Last week we talked about God making a covenant with Noah and his descendants after him and with every living creature, the birds, the domestic animals and every animal of the earth.

Today’s old testament text tells us about the covenant God made with one of those descendants of Noah, Abram. Noah had three sons. One of them, Shem, is the 9th great grandfather of Abram. In today’s text, we recount the third time God has come to Abram. God first visited Abram when Abram was 75 years old and told him that he would have offspring as numerous as the stars. The second time God visited Abram was when Abram was 86 years old and his son Ishmael was born. Ishmael was Abraham’s son by Hagar, the maidservant of Sarai. In today’s reading Abram is 99 years old. Abram is told that he will be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. With this news, God changes Abram’s name to Abraham because the word Abraham means “father of multitudes” or “father of nations.” This covenant is with Sarai also. God will give Abraham a son by Sarai so Sarai also will give rise to nations and kings of people shall come from her. With this comes her name change as well, from Sarai to Sarah.

Later in the same passage, Abraham assumes that it is his son Ishmael, who will be the offspring from which these generations will come so he asks God to bless Ishmael. No, says God. God will make it possible for Sarah to have a child, who will be named Isaac, and it is *that* lineage that will begin the multitude of nations. Ishmael and his mother Hagar were banished a few years after Isaac was born. First they went to Caanan, and then they settled in Mecca. Further in the scripture, after the part we read today, we discover that God had great plans for Ishmael also. It is from Ishmael settling in Mecca that we get the founding of the Islamic religion much later, when God appeared to Mohammed in about the 7th century.

The covenant God made with Abraham in today’s reading is a very important one, and is pivotal for Christianity. It speaks to just how broad God’s interest in humanity within community really is. The current religions of Christianity, Judaism and Islam are all considered Abrahamic religions because they all believe that Abraham was their prophet and his lineage is part of their history. From the lineage of Abraham’s son Ishmael we eventually get the Islamic religion. And from the lineage of Abraham’s son Isaac, the child to come from the blessing of Sarah in today’s reading, comes Christianity. It is the lineage of Abraham and Isaac that Jesus belongs to.

God’s interest in humanity has not ended. It didn’t end with Noah, or Abraham, and it didn’t end with Jesus. Understanding, or maybe even being overwhelmed by, just how many years are represented by both of today’s text is an important step toward grasping just how any of this has anything to do with you and me today. God’s constant care for creation is something sure and steady that we don’t experience in any other part of our lives.

In these next few weeks of the season of Lent, we will continue to read passages that tell Jesus’ backstory in order to understand Jesus’ calling and purpose, and to understand just why Easter is so glorious. Two weeks into the unfolding of this familiar yet mysterious season of Lent, it is appropriate to feel a little incomplete, like there’s something left out. I end today inviting us to stay with that incomplete feeling. I invite us to ask, “Where in my life do I feel incomplete?” “How can my faith help me to feel more complete?” God’s constant unwavering concern with our wellbeing provides the bedrock we need to feel grounded. From that bedrock, we can do anything.

Let us pray…

Gloer, W. Hulitt, Feasting on the Word Commentary Series, Year B, Vol. 2, pp.69-73.

Taylor, Barbara Brown, ibid. pp.51-55