

February 25, 2024  
The Second Sunday in Lent, Year B  
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16  
Mark 8:31-38  
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA  
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

### Questions

We had our first First Communion class of the year yesterday. I love teaching First Communion for many reasons, but one of them is that it's my first opportunity to spend an extended period of time with the youngest theologians in our congregation. Of course, I have the Children's Sermon every week to talk and interact with the children of our church, but that's very different from doing a deeper dive into scripture and theology with the kids, especially since some of them might not be able to come to worship regularly.

The topic of yesterday's class was God Cares for Us and the bible story that we were talking about was the story of manna in the wilderness; the story of how God cared for the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness by providing bread and meat for them when they were hungry. The kids seemed to enjoy the story of the miracle of bread raining down from the heavens so that the hungry, thirsty, tired, and grumpy Israelites' needs could be provided for.

But as we were moving from one activity to another, one of the young theologians asked me a tough question. "If God can make food rain down from heaven, does that mean that God can do anything?"

"Yes," I confidently replied.

"Well then," the student asked, "Why doesn't God make wars stop?"

It was an entirely justified question, a good question, a strong theological question. It was the kind of question that people have grappled with throughout the centuries as people have tried to harmonize the goodness of God and the power of God with the seeming inaction of God on some major world concerns.

People who devote their lives to grappling with those kinds of hard questions from within the church, not leaving faith behind while they struggle with the challenges of faith in God in a broken world are called theologians. People who leave those questions behind along with their faith in a God who they just can't understand are called agnostics or atheists.

So, if you have ever struggled with questions like that and, I think most of us have, or do, and you're still here, you, like one of our eight-year-old First Communion students, are a theologian, not believing that you have all of the answers, but living in communion with God and the church while you ask the hard questions. Questions don't mean our faith is weak or that we are being unfaithful. Questions mean we're paying attention.

We have two Bible stories today that make me wonder why the people in them stuck around to live lives of faith with God in spite of shocking disappointments. When we read bible stories we know the whole story, but the people they actually happened to, people like Abraham and Sarah, had to live through the whole messy middle of the stories before they learned how it would all work out, how God would be faithful to them and to the promises God had made to them.

Our Old Testament reading for today was not the first time that Abram had heard from God. In fact, the first time Abram heard from God was in chapter 12 of Genesis, and, according to the ages given in the Old Testament, at the time of that first encounter, that first call, Abram was 75 years old. God called Abram and told him to travel from his homeland and his extended family on a journey through the wilderness to an unknown land. The promise God made to Abram at the time of that first call was that the childless Abram and his wife, Sarai, would be made a great nation, that they would be blessed, that they would be a blessing, and that in Abram, all of the families of the earth would be blessed.

So, scripture tells us, “Abram went as the Lord had told him.” (Genesis 12:4) It was as simple as that. God called. Abram responded. He went out in faith and obedience to the God who had called his name. According to the text, with no questions asked.

God shows up again to renew the promise with Abram in chapter 15 of Genesis. The text doesn’t tell us how old Abram is at that point, but it’s clear that time has passed. God says, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” (Genesis 15:1)

This time, Abram did have questions. Because he had been waiting, waiting for a long time. Waiting for his children. Waiting for this great nation that was supposed to come from him. So he needed more from God than just a promise and he asked, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?”...“You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” (Genesis 15:2-3)

Again, God promised Abram that he would be a great nation. God promised him that he would have an heir and that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky.

But still Abram waited for the fulfillment of God’s promises. Abram waited. Sarai waited and years later, God made the promise again, with no sign of it being fulfilled, and no answer for why the long wait. It’s a question for theologians. Why did Abram and Sarai have to wait so long for the fulfillment of God’s promises in their lives?

In today’s Old Testament reading we hear about the promise again, this time when Abram is 99 years old. Again, God invited Abram into covenant relationship and again God promised Abram descendants, promised that he would be “exceedingly numerous” (Genesis 15:2) and “the ancestor of a multitude of nations” (Genesis 17:4) and “exceedingly fruitful” (Genesis 17:6). This time the promises came with the name change as Abram became Abraham and Sarai became Sarah. And

God said, “I will bless Sarah and 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.” (Genesis 17:16)

But you know what didn’t happen, at least right away? There was no son, no child, and by this time Abraham and Sarah were old. Really old. Really too old to have children.

Finally in chapter 18 of Genesis, messengers from God appeared to announce that Sarah would have a baby. And Sarah just laughed. The fulfillment of God’s promises to her, the fulfillment of the great desire of her heart seemed laughable to her.

And it did not happen until more time had passed, until chapter 21 of Genesis, when Sarah finally conceived and had a baby, an heir for Abraham, a son, and they named the child, Isaac, which means laughter, because Sarah’s laugh of incredulity and even bitterness turned to laughter of joy, when she finally held her son in her arms.

But Sarah and Abraham’s joy is not what I want us to focus on today. Instead, I want us to focus on their patience during their long, long wait, for God’s promises to them to be fulfilled. Their story raises a theologian’s question, “So, God can do anything? Then why did Abraham and Sarah have to wait to so long to have a child, for God’s promises to be fulfilled in their lives?”

Our gospel reading is not going to give us any answers. In fact, it’s going to complicate things.

Usually when I preach on this passage from the gospel of Mark, Mark 8:31-38 I focus on the first part of the reading, verses 31-33, when Jesus verbally smacks down Peter for contradicting him, rebuking him, after Jesus tells him the truth of where his life, where his ministry is taking him. But today, I want to talk about the rest of the gospel, verses 34-38. Because after Jesus silences Peter he calls the crowd to gather with him and his disciples and speaks these words 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? (Mark 8:34-37)

I think that the people who first heard those words, who hadn't had thousands of years to make them theoretical or symbolic, must have been horrified when they heard them. Because for them, for those people, the cross wasn't a symbol for whatever burden they decided life circumstances had saddled them with, "I guess it's just my cross to bear." For those people a cross was an actual cross. A wooden structure used by the invaders, the oppressors, the Romans, to keep the population in line, so that anyone who resisted the Romans knew that they would have to take up their cross, literally be tortured to death, executed for treason at the crossroads or on the hills.

The expectation was that the messiah would be a military leader who overthrow the Romans and restore the Davidic throne, the Davidic line to its former greatness, and here was a man, here was Jesus, who so many hoped and believed was the messiah and he was, most definitely, not starting the revolution. Instead, he was telling them to be ready to accept Roman punishment, if that was what came to them from following him. He was calling them to a way of peace and submission. He was calling them to a way of faithfulness that might put them at odds with Rome, but instead of telling them how God would smite their enemies he was telling them that they might very well have to submit to the punishment of their enemies; a cross, a torturous way to die.

Even then, the theologians must have come out, asking why? They had had such high hopes for Jesus, for what his coming among them meant, for what his miracles promised, for what might be coming next. Then this. Taking up their cross,

losing their lives? Surely, they didn't know what that was what he had meant when he first said, "Follow me."

My theological question in response to all of this is, "Why did any of them decide to follow Jesus, or keep following Jesus if those were the stakes?"

But what I know is that some of them did. Probably fewer of them than heard Jesus words that day. Probably some of them walked away. But many of them didn't. Many of them stayed. Many of them kept following. Maybe because it was just so good to walk with Jesus that it was worth the risk. Even if they didn't always understand. Even if what he asked was hard and confusing. Even when his face was set toward Jerusalem. Even though, in the midst of a time of war, in a land crying out for revolution, he walked in peace.

And Abram and Sarai, who later became Abraham and Sarah, who had a lot of missteps along their way, continued to live in the shadow of God's unfulfilled promises, continued to live in hope that ebbed and flowed, until one day, those promises were fulfilled.

And for us, who like our First Communion student theologian, have our own questions, questions about these stories of the past, but even more, questions about our own present, and questions about the children of this world's future, questions about where God is and how God is working, even we who have our own "why" questions, might not get any easy answers. We might not get any quick answers. We might find Jesus' words, Jesus' actions or inactions being far more challenging that we could have ever expected.

I once had a pastor supervisor tell me that I should never raise a question in a sermon that I was unprepared to answer. And in this sermon, I've raised at least four questions for which I don't have an answer, possibly more. So, if that long ago supervisor ever runs across this sermon on the internet, he might be upset with me.

But I think that's kind of the point. Not him being upset with me, but that following Jesus isn't about having all the answers or easy answers or sometimes even any answers.

Sometimes following Jesus is about having new and better questions, but always, following Jesus is about relationship. It's about knowing that we do not walk through this life, though this world alone. It's about walking in companionship with God, and knowing that, though the way is sometimes hard and we will have questions, sometimes we will also be surprised, not by the hardness of life and following, but by the goodness of God, by the generosity of God. Sometimes we will be surprised by bread from heaven, surprised by joy, and even find ourselves laughing, when against all odds, we find God is there. Amen.