

Lent 2-February 25, 2024

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

Genesis 17:1-7;15-16, Romans 4:13-25 and Mark 8:31-38

"Good as Dead" Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Grace, mercy, and peace to you this day from God our Father and from his son, Jesus Christ. Amen

Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness. Abraham had faith in God, but Abraham's faith was not certain until he was as good as dead.

Abraham was 99 years old in the story we heard today when the Lord spoke to him and made a covenant with him that he would make him exceedingly numerous. After the Lord told Abraham this, we are told that he fell on his face. It doesn't say why he fell on his face. We don't really know if Abraham fell on his face as an expression of obedience to the Lord when he heard that he was going to become exceedingly fruitful at the age of 99 or if Abraham fell on his face in laughter and disbelief. We do know that Sarah laughed when she was told that she would become a mother at an old age, so it seems likely that Abraham may also have fallen and laughed at this unlikely news. However, as long as there is some life left in you, God will keep speaking to you, until you believe in Him.

Abraham had heard this same promise given to him 24 years earlier. Abraham was 75 years old when the Lord first delivered this promise. The age of 75 doesn't seem as old to me now that I am getting closer to that age. It was 24 years prior to this meeting with the Lord when the Lord first appeared to Abram and told him to leave his country and he would be given land, and he would become blessed with many offspring. There is no question that Abraham exhibited some faith in the early days of his life. Abraham believed the Lord that if he left his country, the Lord would bring him to the land that he had promised him. Abraham, however, likely had some reservations regarding the promise that he would become the father of many nations at the age of 75. It may have seemed unlikely for Abraham at the age of 75, but he believed at his age it was still possible. I doubt if having faith like Abraham was the reason that Richard Gere became a father for the second time at the age of 70 or it was the reason that Mick Jagger fathered his 8th child at the age of 73 or Al Pacino became a father for the third time at the age of 83. These three are examples of men who became fathers at an old age but suffice to say the mothers of these children were a lot younger than Sarah.

The problems that the laws of nature presented to the aging Abram and Sarai did not change the promise that the Lord had given to them. After waiting another 24 years with no sign that the promise would come true, Abram and Sarai did not believe this promise would come true for them. They had taken matters into their own hands to help this promise the Lord had given them but using Sarai's younger handmaid Hagar to fulfill the promise. This was their plan, but it was not the Lord's. Abram and Sarai, now nearly 100 years old, were as good as dead but they were exactly where the Lord wanted them to be. There was nothing within them left to fulfill the promise. So, what does the Lord do whenever a promise is given and put into question? The Lord delivers the promise again. And that is what he did for Abraham and Sarah. And Abraham's faith was counted to him as righteousness. Abraham's faith was restored when he heard the promise again. The promise that never had changed from the first time the Lord gave it.

The Lord could just as easily give up on his disciple Peter who was not always believing what the Lord was teaching. Peter got up and followed Jesus just like Abraham got up and went where the Lord told him to go. However, Peter, like Abraham, began to question what following Jesus really was all about. Even when Peter made his bold confession that Jesus was the Messiah, the very next thing Peter did was to deny that Jesus should have to suffer and die to demonstrate his power over death. Peter was told this over and over, but he failed to believe Jesus until there was nothing else to believe. It was Peter who said the words of faith that we usually sing before hearing the gospel, "Lord to whom shall we go, you have the words of eternal life." The promise that Peter would become a preacher for Jesus was never changed despite Peter's frequent expressions of unbelief.

Paul wrote in Romans that this example about Abraham believing in God was not written just for his sake, but it was written for ours. It was written for the people of Paul's time that needed to hear the promise that the Lord was for them even when all appearances around them seemed to contradict it. And it was written also for you and me.

Jordan Peterson was baptized yesterday. Bristol Goldammer will be baptized in a few minutes. Lennox Kerkhove will be baptized next week. These three receive the same promise that Jesus did when he was baptized. They are all claimed as beloved children of God. They, like Jesus, will be led by the Holy Spirit into various wildernesses of temptations in this life. But also, they like Jesus, Abraham, Peter and you and me will need to hear this promise again and again or Satan will be happy to turn their faith into unbelief. And despite our unbelief that God is for us, his promise remains.

Jesus told Peter that if anyone was going to be a follower of Jesus, they would have to deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. Peter still had not learned what this lesson meant until after Jesus rose from the dead. Abraham had not learned what this lesson meant until he was as good as dead.

God never gives up on you after he has given a promise to you. It is why we gather week after week to be reminded that we cannot forgive ourselves. We cannot save ourselves. But Christ has done this work for you and me. This good news is never too early for someone who is young and receives this promise when they are baptized or for someone who is nearing death like Abraham who was as good as dead.

I invite you to pay close attention to the words of the hymn *Born in a Cry* as we sing it today. In this wonderful hymn we are reminded that Jesus is there at the beginning of your life, throughout your life and at the end of your life with his never failing, never changing promise that you are his. And believing in that promise will be counted by God as your righteousness. Amen