

St Mary's Episcopal Church, Anchorage, Alaska
Message by Rev. Catherine Amy Kropp
Scripture: Genesis 17:1-7,15-16; Psalm 22:22-30; Mark 8:31-38

Sunday, February 28, 2021
Second Sunday in Lent

Called to Listen



Abraham Speaks with God by Cunradus Schlapperitzi¹

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.
(Genesis 17:7)

There is perhaps nothing more reassuring in the human journey than a promise. Not just a good promise. A *divine* promise. A promise that can not be broken. A promise that brings life and freedom. God is declaring to Abraham that God will abide with Abraham and his descendants *forever*. It is rock solid. Indeed, in the psalm that the Praise Singers performed so beautifully today, we listen to the story that “All the ends of the earth shall

remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall bow before him.”
(Psalm 22:26)

And so, somehow, mysteriously, we fall into the story of this ancient covenant that is both deeply personal and profoundly universal: the everlasting covenant among God, Abraham, Sarah, and their descendants, echoing across the generations to us.

We are included in this mystery of faith.

Yet, the story of the Abrahamic covenant is problematic as it comes down to us through a gendered lens. Father Abraham is talking to Father God, affirming the lineage of humanity through the masculine. Sarah, in this great moment of human-divine communication, remains in the background.

And, yet, Abraham’s entire life journey is such a powerful and dramatic witness to this one, personal and universal God, involving the original call into an unknown land, the call into everlasting covenant, the unexpected promise of an heir, the visit by the angels outside Abraham’s tent. God *shows up* in the life of Abraham.

And somehow, by grace and by faith, we are listening.

As Craig Kocher writes, “Even in the darkness of Lent and under the shadow of the cross, the promise that God made to Abraham remains. God is our God, and we are God’s people. This is a covenant that cannot be broken, even as we follow the one named Emmanuel, whose destiny is our destiny: the cross, the grave, the skies.”²

If we follow this lineage from Abraham through Jesus to us, our hearts expand into a new form of being, and we are woven into the fabric of our kinship and common witness. In this human ancestry across time, Jesus becomes the threshold into our new consciousness, breaking through our reality and our presumption, and opening us to what is already and always there.³

We are already participating in the complex, grand narrative. According to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, we form the “listening fellowship in the midst of the wonderful world of revelation of the people of Israel...” We are the “fellowship of believers.” And so we participate by listening, falling into the story and discovering the sacred story of God’s presence among us.⁴

And in our Lenten journey we are invited, as Denise Anderson writes, “to examine the things in which our hearts are invested.”⁵ As we discover this rising consciousness, we discover also the layers that have covered up the ancient covenant within us.

Perhaps we are called to listen in new ways.

In the announcement of God’s promise, God marks the covenant, even sealing it in a way, by giving out new names. Abram becomes Abraham. Sarai becomes Sarah. Small changes in name reflecting a much larger reality: God’s eternal blessing. And all those in the divine story, including us, becoming more numerous than the stars.⁶ Even God names Godself in a unique way as El Shaddei which can mean “God of the Mountains.”⁷

You and I are also given a name in this moment. We are the ones to come. We are the “people yet unborn.” As we hear in the psalm, “They shall come and make known to a people yet unborn the saving deeds that he has done.” (Psalm 22:30)

And so there is in the scriptures the story of naming: identities revealed, promises made, and truths spoken.

And, in today’s Gospel passage, Jesus telling the disciples the truth; the truth of his suffering, death and resurrection to come. Jesus drawing us into this truth, not the truth we want or think we need, but the one that breaks through our human consciousness and our assumptions.⁸ And this moment of truth-telling by Jesus follows just after an even bigger pivotal moment: the climactic moment in the Gospel of Mark when Jesus asks his disciple Peter, “Who do you say that I am?”⁹ And Peter, in a moment of profound revelation, declares who Jesus is, his true identity, naming Jesus as he says, “You are the Messiah.” (Mark 8:29)

We participate in this breakthrough by listening, falling into a story that involves a radical invitation.¹⁰ And we do this listening with our whole being. As Christopher Pramuk describes it, Jesus was “... appealing not just to the head but to the whole person of his listener: heart, body, mind, senses, imagination.”

I wonder, then, as we fall into this narrative, this covenant which includes us by faith and by grace, are we being re-named right now? Are we being called into covenant, again and again?

I wonder, if God were to give you a new name to represent not just who you are but *who and what you are becoming*, what you are part of, including what follows you, what emerges from you and through you, what would it be? Or is there a name for you that is already you that needs to emerge? A new you or an original you woven in the depths of the earth along with your creation.¹¹

If we are being named and re-named, what is then the fullness of our being, individually and collectively? What are we becoming together in the Oneness?

And so we listen during Lent to the ancient, covenantal story, woven within us, uncovering the things that keep us from recognizing this fullness; and discovering again and again the invitation to reflect back to God the faithfulness of God.

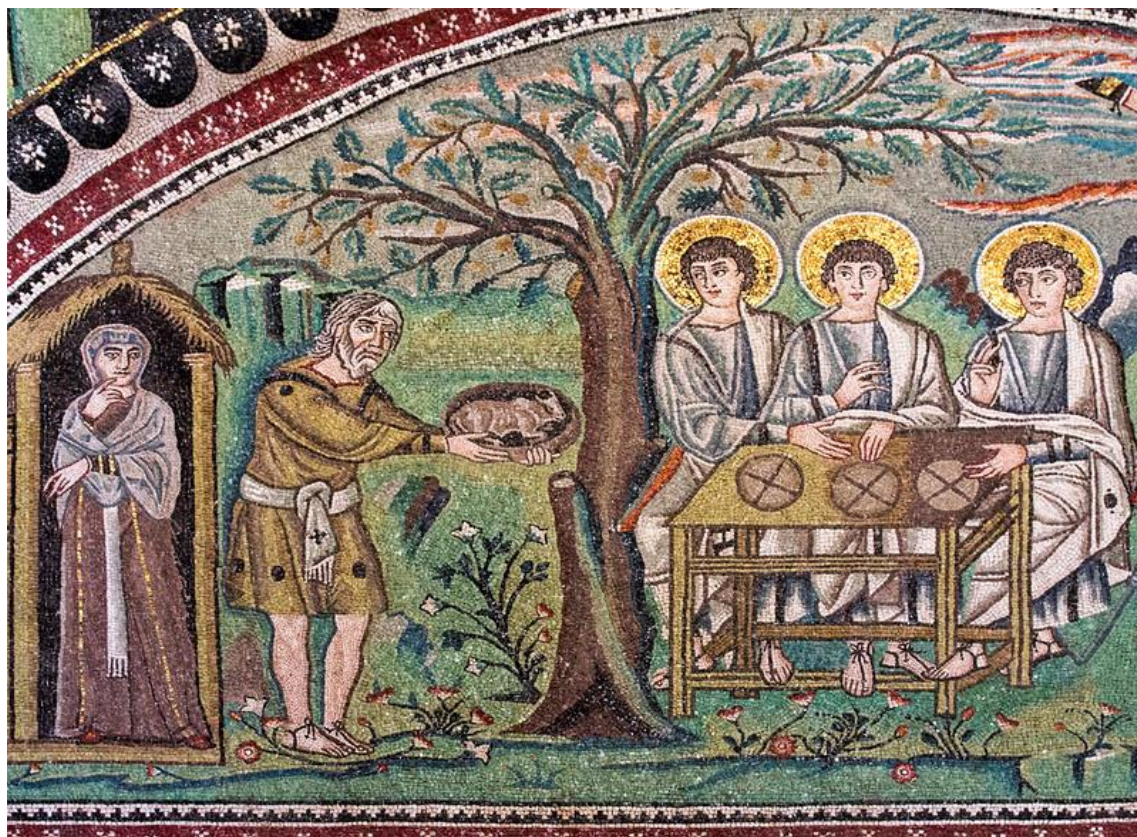
“Often the first step to change,” as Sarah Are writes, “is listening. We have to listen to those we’ve hurt. We have to listen to creation as she cries. We have to listen to the voice of the oppressed, if we ever hope to make things right.”¹²

I wonder if it is possible to embrace the patriarchal witness that is so visible and audible in the story of our redemption, *and also* the subtle witness that is the voice of God’s wisdom, the co-creator in the human, divine, and cosmic story. In Proverbs we remember, “The Lord by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens.” (Proverbs 3:19). What do we hear when we listen with heart, body, senses, imagination, mind and the fullness of our true selves?

Again and again we are called to listen. Because God is listening already to us.

May we find our rhythm, as Sarah Are writes in her prayer, again and again speaking of God’s goodness, our feet walking toward justice, our soul dancing in God’s grace.¹³

Amen.



The Hospitality of Abraham, a mosaic from the basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy.
Photograph by Fr Lawrence Lew¹⁴

READINGS

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. 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."

Psalm 22:22-30

22 Praise the Lord, you that fear him; *
stand in awe of him, O offspring of Israel;
all you of Jacob's line, give glory.

23 For he does not despise nor abhor the poor in their poverty;
neither does he hide his face from them; *
but when they cry to him he hears them.

24 My praise is of him in the great assembly; *
I will perform my vows in the presence of those who worship him.

25 The poor shall eat and be satisfied,
and those who seek the Lord shall praise him: *
"May your heart live for ever!"

26 All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord, *
and all the families of the nations shall bow before him.

27 For kingship belongs to the Lord; *
he rules over the nations.

28 To him alone all who sleep in the earth bow down in worship; *
all who go down to the dust fall before him.

29 My soul shall live for him;
my descendants shall serve him; *
they shall be known as the Lord's for ever.

30 They shall come and make known to a people yet unborn *
the saving deeds that he has done.

Romans 4:13-25

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations") —in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendants be." He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him 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 he had promised. Therefore his faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

Mark 8:31-38

Jesus began to teach his disciples 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."

¹ Schlapperitzi, Cunradus. Abraham Speaks with God, from *Art in the Christian Tradition*, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=56995> [retrieved February 27, 2021]. Original source: [Scan by NYPL, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons](#).

² Craig Kocher, writing in *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide* (Location 1884-1887). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

³ “Imaginal knowing is the only way that the unconscious can move into consciousness. It happens through fantasy, through dreams, through symbols, where all is “thrown together” (*sym-ballein* in Greek). It happens through pictures, events, and well-told stories. It happens through poetry, where well-chosen words create an image that, in turn, creates a new awareness—that was in us already. We knew it, but we didn’t know it. We must be open to imaginal knowing because the work of transformation will not be done logically, rationally, or cerebrally. Our intellectual knowing alone is simply not adequate to the greatness and the depth of the task.” Richard Rohr, “Moving beyond Conventional Wisdom,” Center for Action and Contemplation, February 25, 2021, <https://cac.org/moving-beyond-conventional-wisdom-2021-02-25/>.

⁴ “Because the Scripture is a corpus, a living whole, the so-called *lectio continua* or consecutive reading must be adopted for Scripture reading in the family fellowship. Historical books, prophets. Gospels, Epistles, and Revelation are read and heard as God’s Word in their context. They set the listening fellowship in the midst of the wonderful world of revelation of the people of Israel with its prophets, judges, kings, and priests, its wars, festivals, sacrifices, and sufferings. The fellowship of believers is woven into the Christmas story, the baptism, the miracles and teaching, the suffering, dying, and rising again of Jesus Christ... We become part of what once took place for our salvation. Forgetting and losing ourselves, we, too, pass through the Red Sea, through the desert, across the Jordan into the promised land... It is not that God is the spectator and sharer of our present life, howsoever important that is; but rather that we are the reverent listeners and participants in God’s action in the sacred story, the history of the Christ on earth. And only in so far as we are there, is God with us today also.” Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together* (pp. 29-30). Hymns Ancient and Modern Ltd. Kindle Edition.

⁵ “The Lenten journey calls us to examine the things in which our hearts are invested. How important is comfort to us? Would we be willing to listen to hard truths and be changed by them even if it proved to be difficult? Or are we committed to the status quo because, though it may be imperfect, it’s at least familiar.” Rev. T. Denise Anderson, *A Sanctified Art*, sanctifiedart.org, A Lenten Devotional “Again & Again A Lenten Refrain,” p. 14.

⁶ Craig Kocher, writing in *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide* (Location 1861). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

⁷ Craig Kocher, writing in *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide* (Location 1858). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

⁸ Christopher Pramuk, “Theodicy and the Feminine Divine: Thomas Merton’s ‘Hagia Sophia’ in Dialogue with Western Theology,” in *Theological Studies* 77, no. 1 (2016), 54–55; as cited by Richard Rohr in

"Moving beyond Conventional Wisdom," Center for Action and Contemplation, February 25, 2021, <https://cac.org/moving-beyond-conventional-wisdom-2021-02-25/>.

⁹ Jouette M. Bassler, writing in *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide* (Locations 2467). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

¹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (pp. 29-30). Hymns Ancient and Modern Ltd. Kindle Edition.

¹¹ "The covenant is linked to creation. The God who created all there is, seen and unseen, has chosen Abraham and his ancestors as the firstfruits of creation. The covenant is a royal promise, connecting Abraham to David, Israel's greatest king, and through the house of David to Jesus." Craig Kocher, writing in *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide* (Location 1872). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

¹² Prayer by Sarah Are, A Sanctified Art LLC, sanctifiedart.org.

¹³ Prayer by Sarah Are, A Sanctified Art LLC, sanctifiedart.org.

As you leave this space,
May your mouth speak of God's goodness.
May your arms hold those in need.
May your feet walk toward justice.
May your heart trust its worth.
May your soul dance in God's grace.
And may this be your rhythm -
again and again again,
Until God's promised day.
Go with courage, go with heart, go in peace. Amen.

¹⁴ *The Hospitality of Abraham*, a mosaic from the basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy. Photograph "The Hospitality of Abraham (Ravenna)" by Fr Lawrence Lew and licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0