

## God Keeps His Promises

Sermon: Lent II at St. Peter's Cathedral, February 25, 2018

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Good Morning.

The scriptures selected for this morning continue a central theme of **'covenant'** throughout Lent. Last week we heard the passage from Genesis 9 about God's covenant through Noah and his descendants, never to destroy the world by a flood. Today we hear a brief passage from Genesis 17 about God's covenant with Abraham. Even though Abraham was 99 years old and his wife Sarah is 90 years old, God promised both of them that **together**, they will have a son, whom they were to name Isaac.

The passage is filled with conditions and promises which require our careful attention. Abram changes his name to Abraham. Abram means 'exalted father' and Abraham means 'father of a multitude', meaning that through Isaac there will be descendants whose number will exceed the stars in the sky and the sand in the sea. This passage is connected to many other promises God makes to Abraham which are part of a larger story.

The story of Abram begins in Genesis 12, with his call to leave his home in Haran and go to a land that God would show him. The call was simple, 'LEAVE and GO'. Abraham was promised to be the father of a great nation. So, Abram obeyed and took Sarah and their family with them!

Can you imagine the conversation Abram must have had with Sara, when he said they were leaving all they ever knew and were going to journey into a land that this God was going to show them! Abram did not even know God's name.

By chapter 15, God visits Abram again and renews his promise of an heir, in spite of the fact that for the past 13 years there was still no heir. God promises that Abram will receive an heir through Sarah and his descendants would be like the stars in the sky. Abram believes this promise from the Lord and "**it is reckoned to him as righteousness.**" This promise is the key to understanding why God's promise to Abram was so important to Christianity. Because God's promise to

Abram came **before** the law was given to Moses. This promise takes precedence over the law. As a result, God's covenant included all people, not just the Jews.

In spite of God's renewed promise that Abram's descendants would be numbered as the stars in the heavens, Abrams only heir was Ishmael, the son through Abram's slave Hagar. No wonder that Abraham is considered the greatest example of faith and trust in God that God would keep his promises, in spite of all evidence to the contrary.

By the time God reaffirmed his covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17, Abraham has been journeying with God since his call at 75 years of age. For 25 years, he has been without an heir through his wife Sarah.

The story continues after this morning's reading where Abraham and Sarah are visited in the desert by three angels who promise that in the spring Sarah will have a son. Sarah does become pregnant and gives birth to Isaac. As the two boys, Ishmael and Isaac grow up, Sarah becomes very jealous and threatened by Hagar. She demands that both Hagar and Ishmael be sent away into the wilderness. God then promises that he will make of Ishmael another nation, because he is the offspring of Abraham.

In this longer story, Abraham's offspring give rise to both the Jewish people and the Arab race. After you include the Christian faith as coming out of Judaism, you have the three monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Consider for a moment what God started with Abram back in the second millennium before Christ. Consider what has happened when just one man, Abram, heard God's call and responded. When he decided to leave his home and go to a land that God would show him, he did not even know God's name. What an astounding result from just one man's faithful obedience to God's call.

But there is more. We need to understand the relationship between Abraham and Christianity: between the covenant God established with Abraham and the same covenant Jesus renewed in his incarnation, his preaching, teaching and healing ministry, his suffering death and his resurrection.

The passage we heard from Romans is one of the best explanations we have of the relationship between the faith of Abraham and our faith in Jesus. Abraham is so important because he is the example of faith and trust in God, and not the

example of keeping the law. It was Moses who was given the law for the Jews to follow, but the giving of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai came after the promise to Abraham. Since the promise to Abram came **before** the giving of the law, the promise takes precedence. Paul writes:

“For this reason God’s covenant depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to **all** of his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham.”

Christ’s love was for all, not just the Jew, but also for the non-Jew. That brings us to the gospel passage which we heard this morning. Jesus predicts his passion. He foretells his great suffering, death and resurrection.

He began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and the scribes and be killed and after three days rise and again. Peter, who just a few moments before confessed Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God, completely misunderstands Jesus. He insists that Jesus’ suffering and death must never happen. Peter loves Jesus, but he does not understand him or what he came to do. Jesus came to save everyone, but he would first have to be misunderstood by everyone.

No one would understand that the Son of God would have to suffer at the hands of both the Jewish and the Roman authorities and die in order that the covenant God had first established with Abraham could be fulfilled in Jesus. The covenant God first established with Abraham was for all people, Jew and Gentile. The covenant Jesus would seal with his blood would be for everyone as well.

Before I finish, I want to mention two events which we have been watching unfold over the past several days. One is the horrific shooting that took place in Florida 10 days ago. The other is the death of the evangelist Billy Graham. If you listen to the tributes to Billy Graham, they all say that the one message he delivered all the time was the simple message from the gospel, that ‘God loves you’. That may seem ordinary and something we have all heard many times before, but it is true. The essence of the gospel is that ‘God loves you.’ Billy Graham was correct about that. There is a similar story told about the greatest theological mind of the last century, Karl Barth. He wrote volumes, encyclopedias over the course of his brilliant career. Toward the end of his life he made a visit to the United States and when he got off the plane he was met by a group of

newspaper journalists. One journalist asked him a wonderful question. Professor Barth what is the most important thought you have ever had? He looked at the journalist and with a twinkle in his eye, this brilliant theological mind said, "The most important thought I have ever had is, Jesus loves me, this I know, for the bible tells me so!" That is the essence of the Gospel.

The other event in our news has been this horrific mass shooting in a Florida high school by a deranged, psychotic young man. This man, Nicholas Cruz is now utterly forsaken. And yet, Jesus loves that utterly forsaken man. That may sound crazy and it may seem impossible to believe, but God loves even the forsaken. In fact, it was Jesus who died forsaken on the cross, just as he predicted he would in the portion of the gospel we read this morning. The utterly forsaken are included among those God loves. The gospel of Jesus is that radical.

The Good news is that God keeps his promises. We do not, but God keeps his promises. Because all people, both Jew and Gentile did not keep their promises, God chose to have mercy on all. God's covenant is about promises kept. God is faithful, all the time. In spite of all our efforts to run away from God, God does not run away from us. Instead God runs after us. That eternal covenant is what God started with Abram and seals with the blood of Jesus.

That is the good news. God is faithful, all the time. God loves us. God never gives up on us. And for that we give thanks and praise and glory to God. Amen

The Very Rev. Graham Smith, Interim Dean