

Nutana Park Mennonite Church

February 25, 2024

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Lectionary Readings: Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-16 (NIV); Romans 4:13-25 (NIV)

### **A Story and . . . an Argument**

A very old and strange story and a crisply laid-out, logical argument: that's what the readings today offer us. I use the word "argument" in its older sense of "thesis" or "major conclusion," not a quarrel (although there is a quarrel in the background). Together story and argument offer us a way to think about "faith" that is different from the common meaning of faith as "adherence to a coherent doctrine." I have stumbled over that concept of "faith" so often already that I'm grateful to do some re-interpreting with you this morning.

First, the story. It's an origin story reaching so far back that it's tempting to begin "Once upon a time there was a man named Abram" who left his home country and travelled far off to a land that he believed his God would give to him and to his non-existent descendants. Yahweh had insisted there would be descendants, despite their current childlessness. There's many a story that begins likewise with a promise spoken into an impossible situation, and we inevitably expect a happy ending in spite of that – maybe because of it.

The Genesis 17 passage is actually the fourth instalment of the story which begins in Genesis 12. Abram's father Terah has already moved his family from Ur of the Chaldees, intending to go to Canaan, but they stop in Haran and settle down. That's where Yahweh enters Abram's consciousness and instructs him to leave and "go to a land [Yahweh] will show" him. Then comes the promise: "I will make you into a great nation / and I will bless you" (Gen12: 2).

Since Sarai had been introduced in Genesis 11 as barren, this first iteration of the famous promise is already in the realm of fairy tale.

In Genesis 13, after Abram separates from his nephew Lot, Yahweh renews the promise. Abram responds by building an altar. He has so far been silent.

In Genesis 15, Yahweh comes to Abram in a vision, promising to be Abram's shield and to give him a great reward. Now Abram does speak up. After many years of waiting, Abram's tired of empty promises. Yahweh responds by "taking" Abram outside and showing him the stars in the heavens: "Look up to the heavens and count the stars, if you can count them . . . . So shall be your seed."

And now, also for the first time, we are told about Abram's faith: "And he trusted in the LORD and the LORD reckoned it to his merit" (15:6). The Apostle Paul will make use of that observation in Romans, our second reading for today.

Problem is that there's still no wee Abram to begin the process of building a nation. So Sarai, who now enters the story, offers her Egyptian maid to Abram as a surrogate wife, a common practice then. The result is Ishmael, and bad relations between jealous Sarai and Hagar. I have sometimes wished that Hagar would likewise have remained barren, making it clear that Abram, not Sarai, was at fault. Then the miracle of Isaac would have been even more dramatic and a tad less patriarchal. On the other hand, Yahweh does, in good time, meet the needs of both women. Hagar is not abandoned in the desert, and Sarai is clearly declared to a partner in Yahweh's plan. The all-important son who will bear on his back (and in his loins) the weight of the covenant must be borne of Sarai, not anyone else.

This is the backstory to today's reading from Genesis 17, when the promise is spoken yet again. So important is this conversation that the key players get new names, although the meaning of the names doesn't change. Sarah is still princess and Abraham is still exalted father.

The lectionary skips two parts of the story that I want to bring in here. The first is the instruction to circumcise all the males in the family and entourage. That is now part of the covenant between Abraham and God. The second is the bit that follows Yahweh's insistence that the promised son will be born of Sarah:

“Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, “Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?”

Now Sarah's laughter at the door of the tent from where she was eavesdropping (this is another conversation in Genesis 18) is familiar to me from Sunday School days, but I'd forgotten or somehow missed that it was Abraham who laughed first, falling forward on his face, splitting a gut.

Novelist-theologian Frederick Buechner, in *The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*, conflates the two scenes of laughter into a more modern account: Abraham and Sarah “are laughing at the idea of a baby's being born in the geriatric ward and Medicare's picking up the tab. They are laughing because the angel not only seems to believe it but seems to expect them to believe it too. They are laughing because with part of themselves they do believe it. They are laughing because with another part of themselves they know it would take a fool to believe it. They are laughing because laughing is better than crying and maybe even not all that different. They are laughing because if by some crazy chance it should just happen to come true, then they would really have something to laugh about. They are laughing at God and with God” (50).

Indeed, God seems to share the joke or why else ask them to name their promised son Isaac, which means laughter?

Honestly, this couple is being asked to keep hoping far beyond the boundaries of hope. There isn't a snowball's chance in hell of their bearing a natural child. Given their age (probably exaggerated to make a point), I doubt even today's fertility measures could have helped. Yet the newly renamed Abraham obeys Yahweh's covenantal command to circumcise all the males in the household, including his aged self.

So did Abraham believe? Did he have faith? The Apostle Paul says he did. In today's reading from Romans 4, Paul insists that "against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations. . . . Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead . . . and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God."

Paul has clearly ventured into interpretive territory here. What about that Hail Mary effort with Hagar? What about the wild laughter at the renewal of the promise of many generations of descendants? Is Paul really sure about the unwavering quality of Abraham's faith?

He seems to be, and he needs that certainty for the core of his argument: "It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith" (verse 13).

Paul makes an obvious point here, that becomes obvious the moment that one asks, "when did Abraham receive the promise?" and "when was the Law given?" There may be quibbles about the time gap, especially if you read the Law as the covenant of circumcision rather than the law given at Mt. Sinai. However, the crucial point is that Abraham receives the

promise BEFORE either the command to circumcise or the Law received by Moses. In fact, Genesis never gives us a clue about why Abraham was chosen in the first place. The promise was given. Abraham accepted it. We know that he did because he took steps, literally, to act on that promise, leaving his land to become a nomad who worshiped Yahweh only.

Paul's second obvious point is the fact that if obeying the law earns the right rewards, then faith has nothing to do with it. The promise then becomes a quid pro quo contract. That doesn't require faith.

Like the well-trained rabbinical lawyer that he is, Paul then adds the important "therefore": "the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all." Theologian Matthew Thiessen in *A Jewish Paul* writes of the ongoing struggle within the early communities of Jesus-followers between those who were convinced that Gentiles had to become Jews first and then Christ-followers, and those who declared that the Gospel had come to Gentiles without such prerequisites. That's the context for Paul's insistence here that the "promise comes by faith," not obedience to the law.

If you grant Paul's first point that Abraham was chosen before the coming of the law, then the promise of Yahweh for many descendants, the promise for redemption, if you will, can be only an act of grace which is accepted by faith. And it takes faith to accept an act of grace, because by definition grace is not earned, is not expected—it comes undeservedly, as a surprising gift.

And here is where I also venture into interpretive territory. The year 2023 was a disappointment for me. Thanks to my temporary disability—an unhappy nerve that demanded

weeks of bed rest—none of our usual summer plans could be carried out. It was a summer of smoke and heat so staying inside wasn't so bad, but now climate worries were piled on top of too much political reading about bozos in high office and missiles in the air and nationalist, conspiracist fervor in too many churches and websites. The usual blessed summer soul-restorers—gardening, cycling, and joyous family camping time in the Rockies—were impossible. I struggled against cynical resignation, convinced that nothing in my immediate world, or the larger world, was going to get better. Like some of the psalmists, I felt as if I was watching wicked forces win, again and again. Familiar expressions of faith such as “God is ultimately in charge” rang hollow in my ears. But in the midst of my aloneness, and my desperate (mostly unbelieving) prayers, that beautiful force in the universe (it's sometimes called grace) that somehow drops books off the shelf into needy hands at the precisely the right time was doing its job, more than once.

There are four such gifts behind today's sermon, two of which I've already mentioned—Matthew Thiessen's *A Jewish Paul* and Frederick Buechner's *Telling the Gospel*, both of which “fell” into my hands, seemingly at random.

The two other gifts were new definitions of faith that have not only guided my reading of the texts for today but have begun to minister to my mental and spiritual health in ways I had not anticipated.

The first comes from Sandra Schneiders' *The Revelatory Text* (which had languished unread on my bedside shelf for years and now somehow demanded to be read). In response to several Gospel stories of miraculous healing, after which Jesus tells the astonished recipients, “your faith has saved you,” Schneiders observes that the healed Samaritans and Gentiles were unlikely to have believed in Jewish law, if they even knew it. She concludes, “Faith, then, is not

exclusively adherence to a revealed law. What it seems to mean . . . is a fundamental openness of the person to transcendence. What people whose faith saved them seemed to have in common was their resistance to the primordial human temptation to make oneself the measure of the possible. These people were willing to accept the possibility that something could exist, could act, that went beyond their own knowledge and powers” (59-60).

This is a description of faith that has room for me. It invited me to open my mind and heart to transcendence once again. I could not be the measure of the possible. I didn't have to fulfil requirements, sign off on any doctrinal documents, commit myself to believing that God would soon take command of confused nations, or even refuse to accept facts that didn't fit some predetermined paradigm. I could keep looking, open-eyed, at the world around me, yet still keep in mind (and in my heart) that there were always possibilities, transcendent possibilities.

I happened upon a second definition of faith through *The Christian Century*: “faith is a deeply ingrained condition formed through steady habits, disciplined practices, and reliable instincts that take shape over long stretches of time” (Peter Marty). That was a mouthful that I initially resisted. It seemed to contradict Schneiders' faith as an openness to transcendence. Until I spent more time with Abraham and Sarah's story.

What was it that defined Abraham's faith? From the very first iteration of the promise, Abram went where Yahweh led him. It is not that he earned anything, that he was ever so much better than any man before him had ever been, not even that he understood what was going on. It is that he is faith-full; he is loyal. Never mind the last-ditch effort of begetting Ishmael or the hysterical laughter. Abraham does not stop worshiping Yahweh, does not, at some inner level, give up. That is what is credited to him as righteousness.

In the words of Frederick Buechner, in another book called *The Hungering Dark*, “It is fantastic that in a world like ours there should be something in us still that says [if not a whole-hearted yes], at least maybe, maybe, to the fantastic possibility of God. [After all, “nothing that God has wrought in this world was ever [humanly] possible”] So in Christ’s name, I commend . . . this fantastic hope that the future belongs to God no less than the past, that in some way we cannot imagine, holiness will return to our world” (124-125).

Indeed, if we but have eyes to see, holiness is already present in our world, here and there, wherever someone says no to meanness and offers love instead, whenever someone . . . but I do not want to itemize holiness or list gestures of faith. For now I am content to say again, “nothing that God has wrought in this world was ever humanly possible, so let us commend the fantastic hope that the future belongs to God no less than the past, that . . . holiness will return to our world.” Amen.

Sources:

Buechner, Frederick. *The Hungering Dark*. New York: HarperCollins, 1985.

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Schneiders, Sandra M. *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999.

Thiessen, Matthew. *A Jewish Paul: The Messiah’s Herald to the Gentiles*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2023.