

Reckoning on a Promise

Romans 4:18-25

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Prayer: *O God, you reveal yourself in scripture, for which we give thanks and are bold to approach you. In your promises we have hope. By your grace we receive new life. In this winter of pandemic, help us to look to your promises, find hope that is worth hoping; and find a lightness as we pick up our own crosses and follow in your leading...*

Over half a million Americans have lost their lives to Covid-19 as of this week. The full scope of this loss is beyond imaginable, each life these lives touched someone and mattered to someone, a soul known and loved by God, nevertheless we can hold those who are grieving in prayer and before God in all of God's mystery. The words of Romans remind us of how Abraham oriented his life on a promise from God. "Hoping against hope, he believed..."

And on this last Sunday of February 2021, I'd like to encourage you to lay claim to hope. Not in denial of what has gone wrong in this pandemic, but because of it, as a way to honor those we have lost – for their sake. We are living through a public health crisis which has caused problems and created setbacks in every family; navigating these remaining days of winter with faith may be one of the most positive things we can do for ourselves, our loved ones, our community. This is our cross to bear, a cross which we didn't ask for, none of us wanted. But here it is.

--The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr said: "Most Christians are thermometers that record or register the temperature of majority opinion, not thermostats that transform and regulate the temperature of society." His emphasis on nonviolent action was precisely in order to transform society, not to conform to it. It is by reckoning on God's promise of blessing, not destruction, that we can also be transformers rather than thermostats. Abraham had faith, lived faith, before faith was a thing.

To this day, Jews won't say that they are people of faith. You do not need to have faith to be Jewish. Any Rabbi will tell you that. You can be an observant Jew and have no faith at all – by observing the law, Jew's are born to Jewish mothers, the law is kept in actions. Many other religions do not prioritize belief the way that Christians do. And even for Paul, faith is a gift, not an entitlement – it is a gift that Paul encourages Christians to value, you want this gift, do not overlook this gift.

Abraham is promised three things which are all ... frankly, far-fetched:

- descendants,
- a personal covenant with God
- land¹

"I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." The children of Abraham, will be like the number of stars in the sky, or the

¹ Genesis 12:2

number of grains of sand on the beach. (Jesus says as he makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem if you silence people who are welcoming him, the very stones will cry out). In other words, God will create, raise up, descendants for Abraham. You can't stop it.

This is a promise not a statement of fact, because Abraham and Sarah were mortals like the rest of us, and were subject to the same natural laws that we are. Abraham and Sarah were very much without potential. They were barren. Sarah, the Bible tells us, is past the time of bearing children. You make your peace, one way or another, when you've lived with disappointment for a while. Life has a way of going another way, and you go along. We do this, we adults. It's the mature thing to do – accept your disappointments. Learn from them if we can.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are often described as Abrahamic traditions – meaning they are each derived from Abraham. They claim him separately as their common point of origin. But the three branches do not see the same things in Abraham. For Judaism, Abraham is literally “the father of the nation.” For Islam, prophet Abraham is granted a revelation from the one true God, which he accepts and obeys. For Christianity, it is this chapter in Romans – perhaps more than any other, according to my commentator, Ian Markham —that explains the sense in which Christians are “Children of Abraham.”² Christians find in Abraham the person who had faith in the promise of God. It is a legacy of keeping faith we are heir to.

For Paul there are a lot of important themes that come together here. Rather than obeying the law as a spiritual practice, Paul urges the early Christians to trust in God's promises, just as Abraham did, just as Jesus did as he approached the end of his earthly life. And God kept faith with Abraham, and Jesus. Paul is exploring the history of our faith, to encourage faith. God has that power, to fulfill promises, and to be faithful to a human.

Which brings us to the present time, and our present questions about keeping the promise. Many of you will be familiar with the poem by Robert Frost, *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*: the last stanza is:

*The woods are lovely,
dark, and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.*

You imagine this traveler and he's looking in these beautiful woods, their owner lives in town and he almost gives himself permission to lose himself in these lovely dark and deep woods...but he doesn't, he has promises to keep. His commitments draw him forward. Our promises, our commitments are what define us.

Your credit score is an attempt to quantify how likely you are to keep your *financial* promises. Jesus speaks of money more than any other subject in the New Testament -- it reveals value and integrity in high relief.

² *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol 2; David Bartlett and Barbara Brown-Taylor eds, Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, pp. 62

In his ministry; Jesus said “your faith has made you well” to: a leper, a woman who had hemorrhaged for 12 years, a blind man, a crippled man who sat next to a pool of healing water for 38 years waiting for his turn for healing. Jesus revealed the promise hidden within the suffering in each of their lives.

There is one promise that is kept: The promise of God can overcome and Redeem the suffering of human life. It is the mustard seed of faith. It exists eternally in God, and not in us – Abraham navigated his life by that promise.

In the New Testament, God overcomes suffering on many levels – it is the nature of the living God to turn suffering to blessing, in the “fullness of time.” We could settle for a covenant that God acted in other lives, in Biblical times, but not in ours. We could settle for a covenant that it used to be a great church, but not anymore. We could settle for a covenant that all our problems will be resolved after our death...but that is so far short of the hope that God invites us to live into.

Maybe you know what it is to come to a crossroads, to hear an invitation, to step out on faith, and to be reminded of God’s love for you. Maybe you have seen suffering or suffered yourself in this pandemic. Your suffering is clear to God, and held in the mystery of all that God is. God is keeping the promise, God’s promise is for you, and has been from the beginning... God loves you, and God is able to bend this all towards blessing. You can reckon on that promise, right where you are.

Amen.

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