

February 28 2021 [St. Andrew's]

Genesis 17:1-8, 15-17

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, "I am the Almighty God. Obey me and always do what is right. I will make my covenant with you and give you many descendants." Abram bowed down with his face touching the ground, and God said, "I make this covenant with you: I promise that you will be the ancestor of many nations. Your name will no longer be Abram, but Abraham, because I am making you the ancestor of many nations. I will give you many descendants, and some of them will be kings. You will have so many descendants that they will become nations.

"I will keep my promise to you and to your descendants in future generations as an everlasting covenant. I will be your God and the God of your descendants. I will give to you and to your descendants this land in which you are now a foreigner. The whole land of Canaan will belong to your descendants forever, and I will be their God."

God said to Abraham, "You must no longer call your wife Sarai; from now on her name is Sarah. I will bless her, and I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she will become the mother of nations, and there will be kings among her descendants."

Abraham bowed down with his face touching the ground, but he began to laugh when he thought, "Can a man have a child when he is a hundred years old? Can Sarah have a child at ninety?"

Mark 8:31-38

Then Jesus began to teach his disciples: "The Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the Law. He will be put to death, but three days later he will rise to life." He made this very clear to them. So Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But Jesus turned around, looked at his disciples, and rebuked Peter. "Get away from me, Satan," he said. "Your thoughts don't come from God but from human nature!"

Then Jesus called the crowd and his disciples to him. "If any of you want to come with me," he told them, "you must forget yourself, carry your cross, and follow me. For if you want to save your own life, you will lose it; but if you lose your life for me and for the gospel, you will save it. Do you gain anything if you win the whole world but lose your life? Of course not! There is nothing you can give to regain your life. If you are ashamed of me and of my teaching in this godless and wicked day, then the Son of Man will be ashamed of you when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Sermon: "Stone Soup"

Do you know the story of "Stone Soup"?

It's been told in many languages and cultures throughout the ages.

A wandering monk
with an empty pot and a ladle in his pack
makes his way through a village,
asking people for something to eat as he goes:

a crust of bread or scraps from their tables.
Again and again, he is ignored
or sent away empty-handed.

So the monk announces to the townspeople
that he will host a feast that very evening,
and serve the most amazing meal: stone soup.
The curious townspeople slowly gather at dusk
as the monk starts a fire,
places his pot over it and fills it with water.

Then, from his pack he takes a stone
and carefully drops it into the simmering water.
After stirring for a while, he takes a sip and declares it quite good –
but not quite ready.
“Why not?”
the curious onlookers ask.

“Because it needs a pinch of salt and pepper
and I seem to have none left in my pack.”
One of the people runs to his home and returns with salt and pepper,
which is tossed into the boiling pot with its simmering stone.
After tasting again, the monk tilts his head
and thinks for a moment.
“Do you know what would this stone
even more delicious? Sliced onions!”

Another person runs off and returns with sliced onions,
excitedly added to the pot.

You can guess where this is going:
the routine repeats itself again and again,
with people adding carrots, sliced beef,
potatoes and peas and so on,
until the pot is filled to the brim with a feast
and the people are hovering with anticipation.

A large table is set in the town square, and spoons and bowls are laid out.
One by one, the monk fills everyone’s bowls,
and they sit together and enjoy an evening of laughter and friendship
over a meal of amazing stone soup.

In Genesis 17, God makes an extraordinary claim.

A promise to Abraham and Sarah of many, many descendants,

enough that they would go on to form not just new families,
but new nations of their own, even becoming kings.
The promise also includes land, rich and fertile;
and I suppose they would need a lot of land,
so there'd be room enough
for all these descendants.

It's a wonderful promise, the kind any family would love to hear,
giving them such hope and confidence
in a bright and prosperous future for their children and grandchildren
for generations to come.
God is also promising himself, too;
that he will be their God
– with them –
generation after generation.

God had made this promise to Abraham and Sarah before,
many years earlier, even more extravagantly,
promising that not only would God bless them,
but they and their family would share that blessing
and be a blessing to others.
And here, he's reminding them of it again,
claiming that now is the time:
within the year, Sarah will be pregnant and their son will be born.
And the abundant blessings of land,
a vast family, relationship with God,
the task of sharing God's blessing with others...
...all of that, at last, will begin to unfold.

But Abraham and Sarah do not respond with joy or excitement,
to this firm deadline for the promise to be kept.
You see, they'd been waiting a very long time,
decades,
for God to do
what God had promised.
And it hadn't happened.

And now, Abraham and Sarah are too old to have a baby,
too old to found a family line through which God can bless the nations.
It's a wonderful, amazing promise, yes,
a covenant for the generations;
but it's being made with the wrong people
at the wrong time.
They are too old, too worn down and done.

Sarah has been barren, as the term used to be;
incapable of getting pregnant all her life,
and that has been a source of pain and unhappiness for her,
because she wanted to have children.
And Abraham is a very elderly man.
As God speaks to them of a feast of nations,
Sarah and Abraham know very well
that their pots are empty.

All they have is their faith.

And that is, we have been told,
the reason God chooses them as the parents of many nations.
But when we look more closely at them,
their track record doesn't stand up to scrutiny.

Abraham and Sarah do some awful things,
to other people and to each other;
they lie and try to take the unfolding of this covenant promise
into their own hands,
rather than wait and trust in God.

They are faithful – they always return to God –
but they are also selfish, sometimes,
and full of despair and even doubt.
So Abraham laughs incredulously
even as he falls to his knees
in praise and prayer before God.

Wrong people, wrong promise, wrong time, God;
can a man have a child when he is a hundred years old?
Can Sarah have a child at ninety?
No, of course not;
in their own minds,
they know themselves to be empty and barren;
there is nothing left in them
for God to use to fulfill this promise.

So what does God do?

God re-defines emptiness,
not as the absence of anything,
but as potential for everything:

God re-defines emptiness as space to be filled by him.

God is looking to do something new,
to establish a people that will be his,
sharing God's character and blessing
with the rest of humanity and all creation.
This is an extraordinary plan for God to make.

And in doing this new thing,
Abraham and Sarah's barrenness may be as much a draw for God
as their flawed and wobbly faith.
An empty, flawed pot is not something to be
thrown away, useless.

Rather, God sees it as an opportunity to mend them and fill them up,
and share, through them,
a feast of blessing for the nations.

Like the monk and his stone soup;
people who understood themselves as barren,
without enough to share or help someone in need,
they turned out to not be empty or barren after all,
each one of them had something more to give
than they had believed.

It is typical of God,
as he goes about keeping his covenant promises to us,
for him to reimagine
what's broken, empty or hopeless,
as life-giving
and a means of abundant blessing.

Our gospel reading this morning
foreshadowed God's keeping of his most important promise to us.

Weeks before his arrest and death,
Jesus claimed that he – the Son of Man –
would be put to death,
but that three days, he would rise from that death.
This is an impossibility;
death is the end of life, not the beginning.
It's certainly not something
from which one recovers.

The disciples don't know what to make of this;
Jesus, frustrated, tries to explain.
But this idea that death is not an ending,
that Jesus is going to resurrect only a few days later...
...it's ridiculous.

And what would the point of it be, anyway?
Couldn't he be their saviour, their messiah, now,
and leave aside all this unsettling talk of death?

So what does God do?
In Christ, God redefines death,
not as a final end to be feared,
but as new, abundant life.

God redefines death,
the humiliation of the Cross, the suffering of Jesus, all of it...
...God redefines it as an invitation
into new, abundant, resurrection life for us all.
Another impossible promise kept;
another emptiness, a life poured out,
reimagined as room for us all, in Jesus.

This is the kind of God who created us, who loves us,
who makes us promises and invites us to follow him
and be transformed by that commitment.
A God who sees barrenness and emptiness,
as hopeful potential,
and fills us with his abundant blessing and grace.

Do you ever feel as if you have nothing to offer God?
That your pot is empty and barren?

After this past year of stress,
of constant change,
of worry about basically everything,
after this year that seems to take from us continually
and only gives back to us very grudgingly...
...I'm guessing we've all felt – or you may feel right now –
kind of used up and done.
That you have nothing left to give,
to your family, your friends, your work,
the people and things that rely on you.
That you're an empty pot,

with nothing left to give even to God,
no energy left to serve others
in God's name.

It's a painful and humbling place to find oneself.
But maybe it's not the worst place to be.
Because God has been known to speak to
and use barren, empty vessels
and out of them,
serve a feast of grace.

When God made his covenant with Abraham and Sarah
– for children, for land, to be their God
and for them to be his, to share God's blessing with others –
this promise laid the groundwork
for everything that happened afterwards.

From Abraham and Sarah's own son, Isaac and their grandson Jacob;
to Joseph finding a new, safe place
for his father and brothers and family during a famine;
to Moses, leading God's people out of Egypt
and into the wilderness;
to Joshua leading them
into the Promised Land at last;
through the line of kings to the exile
and home again...
...through every challenge and obstacle,
in times when all seemed hopeless and lost,
this covenant promise
was there for God's people to fall back on.

As some new trouble arose,
whenever the question was inevitably asked:
will God – can God – keep his promises,
the answer was always "yes."

Because God always had,
even the most impossible promise of all:
an empty, weary, barren couple,
filled with new life and a feast of blessing for us all.

The answer still, always, is "yes;"
in Christ, all God's promises are kept.

Jesus came in order that we might have life—life in all its fullness.

Abraham and Sarah's story
invites us to acknowledge our emptiness,
but to hold tight to our faith.

When we feel empty and weary
and hollowed out from all the burdens of this life,
God will – and can – re-define that emptiness for us
as space to fill with his new, abundant life –
life in all its fullness,
enough to spill over and be shared.
Thanks be to God!
Amen.