

March 1, 2015 - Second Sunday in Lent

Genesis 17: 1-7, 15, 16

It's a Complicated Life

"It's complicated" is the new catch phrase, the new short hand, for what is a long and complex series of events that we would rather not explain. Some might remember the recent romantic comedy, It's Complicated starring Meryl Streep, Steven Martin and Alex Baldwin? It's a new fashion love triangle of sorts. While attending their son's college graduation a couple reignite the spark in their relationship... but the complicated fact is they are divorced and have been for ten years. What's more, he has remarried. We know life can be complicated. And new kinds of complications arise as times change.

We live in a complex, highly developed society and for the most part, it comes with too many choices. Often we yearn for the good old days when everything seemed simple and straightforward.

But was it really?

Look at the story of Abraham and Sarah and Hagar: Another love triangle of sorts.

Isn't life with God supposed to be simple and straightforward?

Isn't a deal with God supposed to work out without a lot of twists and turns?

Well the covenant that we read about today comes some 25 or 30 years after God's initial covenant promise to Abraham and Sarah. A lot of water has passed under the bridge between these promises.

Let's refresh our memories.

Abraham is well past middle age when God calls him to leave Haran in the north of the Fertile Crescent. He takes Sarah his wife and all their animals and servants and heads to Canaan. No sooner do they settle there, than they experience drought, displacement, intrigue, war, blessing and recommitment to the covenant.

After ten years of all this craziness there is still no male offspring, no fulfillment of God's promise to make Abraham the father of nations. So Sarah offers her Egyptian slave and handmaid Hagar to Abraham, reasoning that because Sarah owns Hagar, she will own the baby and God's promise will be realized. Abraham complies and begins a new kind of love triangle for his day.

Hagar is soon with child but becomes haughty and proud with her new status.

Sarah treats her badly, to say the least, and Hagar runs away into the desert. An angel appears to her and tells her to go back. She will have a son and is to call him Ishmael because "God has heard your distress. He will be the father of nations." So Hagar returns. Ishmael is born. Abraham is getting old.

Now fast-forward ten to thirteen more years, to where our Old Testament lesson begins. Abraham is a serious senior citizen. Sarah is too. God again speaks to Abraham, renewing the covenant promising that Abraham and Sarah will have a child and parent a multitude of nations.

Abraham “entertains angels unaware” who tell him that a year from now Sarah will give him a son. Isaac is finally born. His name means laughter since Abraham and Sarah laughed at the idea that they would finally have a child at their age.

When Isaac is weaned, Ishmael is now old enough to sacrifice with his father and so gain his birthright. Sarah obviously doesn’t want this and demands that Hagar and Ishmael be sent away. Abraham loves Ishmael and reluctantly agrees only after God promises that mother and son will indeed be blessed and cared for by God. The story takes some more twists and turns, but I think we get the picture.

Life is not simple! Life is complicated! And we certainly add to life’s complications! Even long ago it was complicated. Abraham and Sarah discover that life in covenant relationship with God was anything but straight forward and predictable. Harmony and order were not simple in the cards.

Being called out on the Lenten journey is not simple today. Yet, somehow we get the idea that when we are called out onto the journey everything should be just fine, everything should just work out. After all we remember the line: “If God is with us, who can be against us?” We have been told that the path should be ‘straight and narrow.’ So we expect harmony and order all along the way.

However with the story of Abraham and Sarah and the story of our own lives,
the journey into God has many mistakes, many twists and turns.

It is measured in decades, not days.

The Application for Today:

Life with God sure can be complicated and we can make it even more so,
but God sticks with us no matter what. Amen.

Mark 8: 27-37

The Peace that Passes All Understanding

We all have our good days and our bad days. When we are young this often refers to external events, what is happening to us positively or negatively. A good day is getting an “A” in school. For some of us it was just passing. Now I know I am dating us all since there are no ‘A’s and no failing grades in school anymore. A bad day back then was getting in trouble and being sent to the principal’s office. I was sent to the office my first day of Kindergarten. I started dearly and went often. As we mature into adulthood, good or bad days refer more to our workload, relationships and responsibilities. Too much was bad and just right was good.

Fast forward another couple of decades or more, and good or bad days refer to how we feel and respond. It's much more of an internal thing. "I feel quite well today and act accordingly". OR, "I feel poorly today so I act badly". You know what I mean; the aches and pains club. The thing is we expect harmony and order in our bodily functions and can get really bent out of shape when the system doesn't cooperate.

As we also know, it is one thing to admit that we have our good days. It is another thing to admit to our bad days. We even make fun of this by referring to our bad days as bad hair days. We know deep down inside somewhere that for some reason we can be we can be wonderful and we can be terrible in short order. We've all experienced how a good day can suddenly turn bad and our changing attitude is right in the middle of it all.

We recognize this is our gospel lesson. Peter is celebrated for seeing the truth about Jesus, "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God."

But Peter is soon rebuked because he can't see the real implications.

Peter thinks if Jesus really is tight with God,

if Jesus really is the anointed one,

if Jesus really is on a mission from God, (like the Blues Brothers)

then nothing bad can possibly happen to Jesus? Right? Wrong!

Life is more complicated than that. And yet, we expect harmony and order and can get bent out of shape when they don't automatically happen.

"I just want to do this..." We confuse harmony and order with peace and are anything but peaceful if they fail to materialize. Sometimes we forget that the world in which we live wants its own way, not God's way.

So, Peter starts chastising Jesus for naming the shadow side of human reality. Peter denies the truth that in any 48 hours we can be wonderful and we can be terrible. Within a few minutes, Peter makes the wonderful to terrible, transition himself as Jesus says,

"Get behind me Satan, your thoughts don't come from God but from humanity."

But notice, Peter is rebuked, but NOT rejected.

Peter is exposed, but NOT expelled.

Peter is chastised, but NOT chased from the fellowship.

Peter is still precious to Jesus. He is still a friend.

We are still friends of God too.

Jesus knows that within any 48 hours we can be both wonderful and terrible. This happens because individually and collectively we just don't want to face up to suffering or work through our own suffering. We want harmony and order instead. And because of this we don't really understand suffering very well. Suffering today for most people usually equals pain. However we all know the more precise legal phrase "Pain and suffering". Pain is physical pain. Suffering is having to undergo some sort of unwanted or unwarranted experience. Suffering often is an undeserved ordeal or a self-inflicted agony. Pain is inevitable but suffering is not. So, a lot of what we struggle with today amounts to issues of letting go of control, letting go of our ideas of harmony and order and allowing another agenda to supercede our own.

Let me be perfectly clear: Following Jesus is not about self-help.

It is about self-sacrifice. It's not about harmony and order, it is about real peace, the peace that passes all understanding.

You see Jesus has ushered in God's New Day. He has gathered a group around himself. The movement is growing and now on the move to Jerusalem. There the authorities will see what he is up to and decide for themselves whether to embrace Jesus, and God's New Day or kill him because it.

Jesus is willing to let go of harmony and order to allow the situation to play out.

He is willing to hand himself over to the response of the authorities.

He is willing to suffer the consequences.

He is willing to undergo whatever happens, to establish God's New Day in the Holy City. He is at peace with this process.

The Application for Today:

Lent is about letting go.

Let's let go, and allow the peace of Christ which passes all understanding, to lead us. Instead of losing our life, this is how we find it! Amen.