

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-17 Pastor Bill Uetricht 2.25.21 2 Lent

Have you ever thought of your life as a sophisticated or, honestly, less-than sophisticated novel that contains all kinds of twists and turns, rooted in the goodness of life, but, nonetheless, shaped by sad and unfortunate occurrences—all of which make you wonder how it will end?

Bev and I made promises to each other back in 1981. That means this year we will celebrate our 40th anniversary. Yikes! How did we get this old? We were young when we made those promises; she was 23 and I was 22. (Obviously, I married an older woman!) We were naïve. We probably didn't know what we were getting ourselves into. But I must admit that right off the bat, Bev had to deal with my gall bladder disease, something that generally isn't very serious. But for me, it became such. I was sick on our honeymoon. She'll tell you that at the end when we had to clean up the condo we were staying at in Ft. Myers, I spent most of the time lying in bed.

But our marriage began with promises we took very seriously. Through thick and thin, we were going to be committed to each other. Now honestly, we probably didn't know what that meant. We didn't know the twists and the turns that life would bring us. A church person all of life, she probably thought that this ministry stuff might contain some challenges but wouldn't have anticipated how all-consuming it could become. We both wouldn't have anticipated that despite the fact that we have known each other all of our lives and really are on the same page when it comes to most of the big things in life, we really are different people. Difference is good, but difference can sometimes be a trial.

Neither of us would have expected that her Mom would have been diagnosed with one of the worst diseases imaginable, Huntington's chorea, a genetic disorder that terribly disabled her and

hangs over Bev's head as a possibility for her now. We wouldn't have anticipated that that disease meant we would have to make a decision about not having any more biological children, which is why we ended up adopting Jacob. The only way the disease is stopped to stop biologically reproducing.

Who would have anticipated that two weeks after both of our children were born, Bev would end up in the hospital and the intensive care unit with a mysterious auto-immune disorder that would threaten her very existence? I remember standing in the hospital hallway with our doctor talking about the prospect of being a young widower, with two very young children to raise. I am not sure that I, or we, signed up for that.

The twists and turns of life, of course, make it interesting, but they also terrorize the sense that we have of the goodness of life; they can threaten the promises that are made to us and by us. And in the midst of that threat, we wonder where life is going and how we live in the meantime.

Welcome to the world of Abraham and Sarah—or Abram and Sarai as they are known before God invades their lives with a big promise. When Abram was 99, God showed up to him, announcing to him a covenant that he was making with him—a covenant that would make him “exceedingly numerous.” That is to say, God is promising that Abram will have a huge family, all kinds of descendants.

But there is a big problem. Both Abe and Sarai are really old. And as Paul says in Romans, they are as good as dead. They are ready for the nursing home, not the maternity ward. Abram falls on his face when he is told this. Falling on the face is often a way of talking about worshiping in the presence of something very big. But I have a feeling that part of the reason Abraham falls on his face is, well, he's like, “Are you kidding me?” Later he will fall on his face and he will laugh and will

say: “Can a child be born to a man who is 100 years old and to a woman who is 90?”

The story goes on to tell us that Abe and Sarah try to have a child, but they can't. What about the promise? Where is it? Where indeed is the goodness of life? Abraham takes matters into his own hands and tries what we would call surrogacy. Another woman bears a child for them. But that wasn't what God promised. Eventually, they have a child, and they name him Isaac, laughter, because everybody laughed when they discovered that some old folks who were as good as dead were going to have a child. And the consequence of this new baby was a boatload of descendants.

Last week we heard about a covenant that was between God and all things and all people. This week the covenant is more specific. This narrative begins the story of a particular people. Abraham and Sarah become the parents of the nation of Israel, although I must point out that this story may be more inclusive than that. Paul describes Abraham as the “father of us all, the father of many nations,” something worth considering in light of the reality that Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all believe that this man is their spiritual father.

I find that interesting, as does Paul. (Maybe faith is the struggle and calling of all of us, no matter our label.) In our reading from Romans, Paul highlights Abraham for how he lived in response to the promises made to him. For Paul, who is trying to deal with some enemies who think he has abandoned the Old Testament and the law, Abraham is the consummate man of faith. “He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, being convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.”

For Paul, Abraham was the supreme example because he was the consummate person of faith. He lived by trust. In the midst of the turns and twists of life, Abraham trusted, an action, a lifestyle, which God “reckoned as righteousness.” What Abraham lived is what God wants, although we must admit, as Erin Finn said in our Bible study the other day, Abraham wasn’t always that stellar in his trusting. He blew it on many occasions. But, nonetheless, Trusting is the calling from the God of promise.

But that’s hard. The twists and turns of life make trusting difficult. The way people evolve and life changes make turn trust into a huge challenge. Trusting is the hardest thing we do in life. Could it be that trusting is what Jesus is calling us to when he asks us to pick up our own crosses and follow him? Could it be that trusting is what he wants to lead us to as he tells us that it is in dying we live. Trust is not easy, which is why, understandably, we so often hold on to control and power. It’s why we manipulate things and people. We want it all to work out as we planned it. But life doesn’t work out the way we planned it sometimes. Real life gives us twists and turns. Real life threatens our sense of trust.

I suspect that Israel got that. It would not surprise me to learn that this Genesis story about Abraham and God’s promise to him became so significant to Israel’s collective memory after the experience of the Babylonian captivity, when the Babylonians destroyed their holy city and their holy temple and sent off many of their brightest into exile. I am sure the issue became: what happened to the promise? Where is the promise now after the devastation?

We ask the same questions. Where is the promise after we have lost a loved one? Where is the promise when marriages don’t work out, when people are unfaithful, and the changes are just too great and

marriages need to come to an end? Where is the promise in a horrible pandemic?

By the way, these questions are more than okay. To ask them is to be truly human and, from my perspective, to be people of faith. Faith is the struggle. It's the journey, not always the destination. And the journey is a journey toward trust.

And from our perspective, this journey is always begun with, surrounded by, and ended with promise. And I must tell you, though, that promise isn't a matter of certainty. Things may not work out as we expect. Promise always includes an element of risk.

But I am going to speak the promises anyway. And I am going to highlight that these promises come from Something, Someone larger than me or you.

God said to Abraham, I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generation, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your offspring after you.

Then Jesus began to teach them that [he] must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, *and after three days rise again.*

Promise: that is what we live in light of. Paul says we live in response to the promise of the one who made the impossible possible when he granted a child to the aging Abraham and Sarah, when he raised Jesus from the dead, and ultimately, when he called into existence the things that do not exist, that is to say, when he created everything. Life has been about promise from the very beginning.

Again, promise is risky. I like what Joseph Sittler says about promise: "The risk is the romance." Living by trust is risky. It can all fall apart, and sometimes it does. But wow! Where promise can take us!

Maybe to uproarious laughter! Because who would have expected that? A bouncing baby boy! And maybe it will take us . . . to a cross. Who would have expected that? Who would have wanted that? But let me tell you. There is promise in that cross. Death to self is not as bad as you think. It will bring you to new life, abundant life. As Jesus says, after three days, you will rise again.

Yes, that's more risky promise. But remember: the risk is the romance.