

3/1/2015 “The Difficult Part of God’s Promises” Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 Mark 8:31-38

We’ve all heard promises we know we cannot believe. Election years bring them in abundance: “Elect me, and things will be better. I’ll balance the budget, lower taxes, make our schools full of high achievers, lower medical costs for the elderly. I’ll make the world a more peaceful, profitable place.” And we hear similar offerings in advertisements and ads: “Buy this product, and your life will be easier, more productive, more impressive,...whatever.”

We have learned, often the hard way, that promises can very often be empty.

Well, how about this promise: “For God so loved the world, that He gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall have everlasting life”? (John 3:16)

Are God’s promises good, or not?

God’s promises certainly seemed iffy for old Abraham and Sarah, long years ago. First God had promised the childless man Abram that God would make him father of a nation. Year after year passed, with no children and with Abraham and Sarah both being well beyond the normal ages of child-producing. Finally, with no pregnancies occurring, Abraham and Sarah took things into their own hands, and Sarah let her servant, the Egyptian maid Hagar, have intercourse with Abraham.... Abraham’s first-born son, then, was Ishmael, who later became father of the Islam religion.

Still no baby for Abraham and Sarah.... Thirteen years after Ishmael was born, 20 years after the first promise to Abram, God once again promised Abraham that he and Sarah would have a child... Within the year, they did. God was true to God’s word, even as human doubt tried to get in the way and mess with God’s plan.

In the reading from the Gospel of Mark, we heard anything *but* empty promises from Jesus. No soft-pedaling. Jesus told Peter that to follow Jesus meant to have to deny self and be ready to carry a cross. “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” (Mark 8:35)

Are these words still for us, or not? Can we trust them, some two thousand years after they were first declared?

We struggle to make a living, we struggle to pay our bills. We struggle in our relationships, in our decisions. We struggle to deal with all the news reports that assault us daily... We struggle with very real fear: will terrorism continue to spread, and identity theft, and if so, what will this mean to me? We struggle with growing old, as health and money and dependency issues become heavier and heavier burdens. Even life itself seems fickle, untrustworthy, as folks we love get sick, as the economy still seems to keep lots of folks down, and as nobody seems to have reasonable and well-thought-out solutions to society and the world’s problems. Our

Congress adds to the uncertainty with all its political power struggles. It's hard to trust anything or anybody!

Peter and the other disciples had been with Jesus for quite a while when the events of today's lesson took place. Peter had confessed his belief that Jesus was the Messiah. But when Jesus started telling him that as Messiah, he would suffer and die, Peter didn't want to hear it. No way!! Messiah is supposed to come in and "kick butt," not suffer and die!

So where are we, today, in this scripture? Do we stand with Peter and say, "Lord, I claim you as Messiah, Savior, but I don't want to hear anything about suffering or defeat. I am a Christian, so I expect you to give me peace and strength and joy and good health and enough to eat and always, a sense of blessing. You need to HEAL these people for whom we pray, make them well. If you will only do what we ask, others will see how powerful our religion is, and they'll decide to become Christian, too!" Isn't that the way it ought to work??

Did Jesus suggest that this is the way life as a Christian would be? I know he told the Samaritan woman (John 4) that he could give her water so that she would never be thirsty again... But he meant thirsty for life, not the kind of thirst when your throat is parched. And Jesus said that he came so that folks could have abundant life, but this abundance is not limited to the standards of American life we might call "abundant," where there is a fat bank account, a three-car garage, four bedroom, a three-bath house, two children, decent cars, great educational opportunities, and an impressive salary.

The kind of abundance Jesus was talking about is the same sort of thing he told Peter in the lesson today: "Whoever will lose his life for my sake will find it." It is the abundance one has when one trusts God enough to be willing to lose even one's life in the course of trying to love God and/or love one's neighbor. The abundance that even when everything seems to be going wrong, the person is able to know and trust God's care. Even when there is no evidence of God's care, the person dares to believe that God is there.

Jesus offered a new focal length, a new lens through which to view power and life. It was and still is radical: In order to gain life, one lays it down. To be powerful, one lets go of attempts at holding onto power. Instead, hold onto relationship with God. There is a new focus beyond any of the human goals or measurements or conflicts so prevalent: God, and God's call for us to walk blamelessly before God. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your being, and love your neighbor as yourself." The rest will fall in line.

In school we learned how to draw a line: Two points, then hold the ruler to those two points and push the pencil. The original two points determine everything else: direction, minimum length, value. In math if there is an error in either point the line will be all wrong.

Life isn't so different. First point: God. God has provided us life. God loves us, God has given us promises, God is present with us every step. The other point: Our response to God. Our

response to God determines each direction our life-line takes, and its value.

I've mentioned Clarence Jordan before. He was a Baptist preacher who ran a community in South Georgia called the Koinonia Farm during the 1950's & 60's. He lived at Koinonia because he felt it was his calling to show the world that a mixture of peoples and races could live together and share the produce of the farm and in that way live out the Kingdom of God. Clarence was ridiculed, called a communist, his crops were burned, his tires were slashed, his people were shot at; he was not made welcome in any way in South Georgia.

The story is told that one day Clarence approached his brother Robert, a lawyer, about handling a legal transaction for the Koinonia farm. Robert responded:

"I can't do that. You know my political aspirations. Why, if I represented you I might lose my job, my house, everything that I have accumulated."

Clarence replied, "We might lose everything too, Bob."

"It's different for you," his brother said.

"Why is it different?" Clarence asked. "It seems to me that you and I joined the church the same Sunday, as boys. I expect when we came forward the preacher asked me the same questions he did you. He asked me, 'Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?' And I said, 'YES!' What did you say, Bob?"

"I follow Jesus, up to a point," Bob said.

"Could that point by any chance, be the cross?"

"That's right! I follow Jesus to the cross, but not onto the cross. I'm not getting myself crucified."

"Then, Bob, I don't believe that you are a disciple of Jesus. You are an admirer of Jesus, but not a disciple. I think that you ought to go back to that church you belong to and tell them that you are an admirer and not a disciple."

"Well now," replied Bob, "If everyone who felt like I do did that, we wouldn't have a church, would we?"

"The question, then," Clarence said, "is 'Do we have a church?'" (source unknown)

Do we have a church? The scripture lessons we hear during Lent would have us know that we had better never try to "tame" Jesus, to try to make him our personal "wish deliverer" or errand boy. Today's lesson helps us see that our ways are most of the time NOT God's ways, and vice versa, because most of the time we are out for ourselves, to save our own skins, to smooth our own paths, to get through life intact. Jesus' ways are different. He gave himself up in order to give others life.

The reality is that Jesus did not come to earth to fix all our problems; God is not about reconstructing the world around our beliefs and wishes. We do not own God. God calls us to follow GOD's ways, to obedience to and trust in God, to live believing that what God has revealed to us through Jesus Christ and the witness of the Bible is indeed the way for us to experience true and lasting - even everlasting! - blessing.

There's no soft soap or hard sell. God tells it straight and hard: "I love you. I am with you. I want you to trust me. Follow Jesus. It will be tough. You will have to give a lot up, because I ask you to love your neighbors, even those you would call enemies. I ask you to be willing to lose even your life for my sake. In exchange, I offer you life and peace you'll find nowhere else. Your choice, but it's a tough, hard choice, and it will never be easy. If you sign on, you must do things MY way, even when it goes against every grain in your body."

We're in Lent. We're here to learn of God and God's ways. We're here to dare to live our lives as followers of Jesus. We're here to find life in the midst of a world that too often seems bent on destroying it.

God doesn't promise a life free of suffering, God promises a life in which suffering has meaning. God doesn't tell us that we are going to get all the things that we want, but God assures us that we will have what we need for the cross we are to carry.

Each of us faces a challenge, and it's hard, for we must decide whether or not we can trust that Jesus was telling the truth for us when he said: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." (Mark 8:35) May this Lenten challenge lead us to life, life now and life forever.

"O Lord, you who promise to be with us through every twist and decision of life, help us so to forget ourselves that we may be forever remembered in your kingdom. In Jesus' name, Amen.