

“Rend Your Hearts: Claiming the Promise: Walk Before Me” (28 Feb 2021)

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells

Based on material from UMC Discipleship Ministries¹

As we enter this second week of Lent, we meet another one of the great figures of the Bible: Abraham. Say the name “Abraham” and most of us will have to scratch our heads a bit to figure out just where he fits in the story of God and Israel. We may remember the old song from Sunday School that taught us something about him:

Father Abraham had many sons,
Many sons had Father Abraham.
I am one of them,
And so are you,
So let’s just praise the Lord!
(Right arm, left arm, and so on...)²

Here, of course, the song is speaking about Abraham’s “sons” in the faith, from the time of the Hebrew Bible down to today. And even though it doesn’t say it specifically, there is room for the ladies in this family of faith; it’s not just sons but daughters, too, who are numbered in the multitude of Abraham’s offspring. The main point of this song, I think, is simply that Abraham believed God and because of that, God blessed him with descendants, both physical and spiritual.

Now, here’s something we don’t often remember about Abraham. Old Abraham was in with God for the long haul. Today’s lesson is not the first time God had come to Abraham with a promise of covenant and blessing—it is the third time.

- God first called to Abraham when his name was Abram (more on the name change in a moment). He was then 75 years old.
- In the second encounter a few years later, God renewed the promise—land and offspring.
- In the third meeting, the one recorded in today’s lesson, God repeated the promise once more, when Abram was 99 years old.

Here’s something to think about: It took 24 years before God’s promise to Abram was fulfilled. We don’t stop to think of that period of time very often because we read Abraham’s story in a few chapters in Genesis, from chapter 12 to chapter 18. Twenty-four years; three conversations with God. That’s a long time to hold out for a promise.

Here’s something else about Abraham. We often talk about his faith and how God blessed him, eventually, for believing. But what about the sacrifices Abram made? He gave up a great deal to walk before God. Over those 24 years,

¹ “Walk Before Me, Rend Your Hearts: Claiming the Promise,” UMC Discipleship Ministries, article on internet, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/rend-your-hearts-claiming-the-promise/second-sunday-in-lent-year-b-lectionary-planning-notes/second-sunday-in-lent-year-b-preaching-notes>, accessed 23 Feb 21.

² “Song: Father Abraham,” Missionbibleclass.org, article on internet, <https://missionbibleclass.org/songs/english-songs/old-testament-songs/father-abraham/>, accessed 23 Feb 21.

- he lost his homeland when God told him to leave Ur (in modern day Iraq) and move to the land of Canaan (today's Israel)—that would be like us being told to leave Thurmont and go plant ourselves in the plains of Kansas;
- he lost his sense of security when God promised again to give him a child...and, when nothing happened, he and his wife decided to have a child by his wife's maidservant, Hagar; and,
- he lost his name when God established the Covenant with him.



We do well to think on this kind of sacrifice during this time of Lent. Giving up chocolate and coffee just don't seem to cut it when we read about Abraham's sacrifice, about what he gave up to follow God. What are we willing to give up to follow God?

In today's lesson, God returns to Abraham with a covenant of promise (land and descendants), and another condition:

“When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, ‘I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless’” (Genesis 17:1).

What does this command mean, walk before me and be blameless? Or is it two commands: walk before me and be blameless. We've heard the word “blameless” once before in the Genesis story. The first time it was used to describe the qualities of Noah: “Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God” (Genesis 6:9).

- The word blameless can mean to be perfect in the sense of being complete, all together, not lacking anything.
- It was also used so say something was wholesome, sound, unimpaired, having integrity.

This seems to be the meaning in reference to both Noah and to Abram.

Being blameless and walking before God are tied together somehow.

Perhaps the covenant-making God is saying to Abraham:

“Keep moving forward. Keep moving forward with me; don't give up on the promise.

Even as the years pass and the body ages, keep walking with me, walking before me.”³

Noah was told to “walk with God.” Abraham was told to “walk before God.” Are they the same thing? Probably so.

Walking before could mean being put on display. In our more formal language, we might say: “Bring the food before me so I can see it and judge for myself.” Or to a school-age child: “Bring your homework before so I can see that you did it.” (But as every parent knows, this is fine up to a certain age and then, good luck with that)! So, before probably means to represent. But most profoundly for Abraham, it meant he had to walk without all the answers for most of

³ “Walk Before Me,” *Discipleship Ministries*.

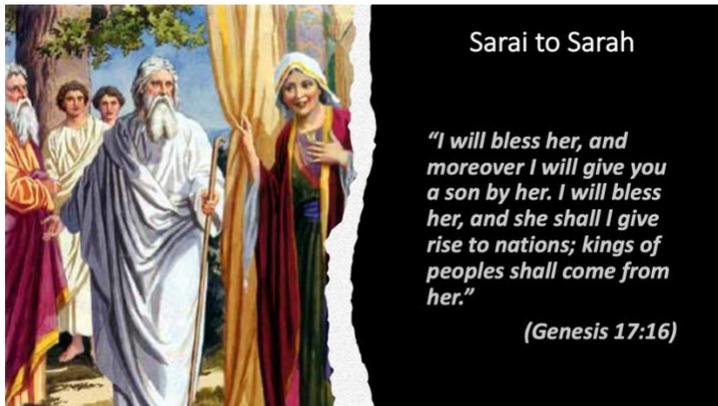
his life. To “walk by faith and not by sight” for he certainly had seen nothing of the promises God had made over the past 24 years.

God gave Abraham a direction; but it was up to Abraham to figure out for himself how to follow the path of faith. Sure, he made some mistakes along the way. We all do. Not long after God’s second appearance to Abram, he and his wife (she’s in on this too) decided they couldn’t wait years or God to show up again, so they made a plan for Abraham to have a son with Sarah’s maidservant, Hagar. Sometimes Abraham hurt the ones he loved by making some bad choices.

- But he kept on walking.
- He kept on seeking.
- He kept on asking God for guidance.

And when he got it, he changed direction. And when God was sure Abram was committed, God changed his identity. No longer would he be Abram (exalted father), but Abraham (father of a multitude). This part of the covenant was true in two ways:

- First, Abraham did become the father of the Hebrew people, of the people called Israel. These were his literal descendants, his children in the flesh.
- Second, Abraham’s spiritual offspring did indeed become a multitude that includes all of us...so the “Father Abraham” song is correct. All who seek to follow God and walk with God by faith, even when we mess up, are the spiritual children of Abraham.



We’ve talked a lot about Abraham today but there’s someone else who was important in this story—Abram’s wife, Sarai. Sarai is significant because, for one thing, women did not get much play in the biblical stories. Normally, they are in the background, doing what was considered at the time to be “womanly things.” They were servants, slaves, field workers, child-

bearers, house-cleaners, and prostitutes. Women were considered property of their fathers if they were unmarried, and of their husbands if they were.

Sarai’s name is sometimes translated as contentious or quarrelsome—talk about your biblical stereotypes coming from a male point of view. But God changed her name too so that Sarai became Sarah, which means princess. And God offered her her own blessing: “I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her” (Genesis 17:16). Sarah becomes a leader in shaping the nation that would come out of God’s covenant with Abraham and Sarah.

While there are plenty of things we can take away from the story of Abraham and Sarah, here are two lessons that I find helpful, and I hope you do too:

- **First off, God is faithful, no matter what.** Abraham and Sarah had to wait a long time before they witnessed the fulfillment of God’s promises to them. In that time, they feared,

they doubted, they schemed because...well, they were human. In the end, God proved to be as good as God's word. Despite their advanced age, Sarah conceived and gave birth to Isaac. We, too, will experience times of doubt, times of questioning, times of searching in our own lives. Come what may, God remains faithful.

- **Second, even though their faith wavered, Sarah and Abraham still followed God.** That kind of patience is hard to come by these days. Ours is a society geared toward instant gratification. Stories told on television and in movies are resolved in 30 minutes to an hour...two hours, tops. Lots of folks (not all) who set out to lose weight or build up their bodies give up after a little while because they can't wait to see the change. No wonder we have trouble following anyone or anything for very long.

Today, we might say Abraham and Sarah realized they were running a faith marathon, not a sprint. Twenty-four years into their journey with God, they remained in the dark; they could not see what would come next. But for some reason, they still believed. They were still willing to walk before God, step after step after step.

How about us? In this season of Lent, can we follow God the way Abraham and Sarah followed? We cannot see what comes next on the journey...we don't know all we will be asked to sacrifice for God...we cannot see the twists and turns in the road ahead. But God gave us Jesus Christ to lead us, to walk before us, ahead of us, and with us, to be the frontrunner in the race of faith.

Jesus Christ has overcome sin and death for us, so that we might have eternal life with and for God. So, "let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith..." (Hebrews 12:1-2).

God is faithful.

Amen.