

Our Preconceptions vs. God's Promises

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Gates Presbyterian Church

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Genesis 17:1-7, 15-17

Mark 8:31-38

Were I to compose a written quiz and ask you to name the ten most faithful if not important figures in the Old and New Testaments, I suspect Abraham and Peter would appear on many a list. I suspect we could think of many occasions in the Biblical record when those two men demonstrated love of God, reliance on their Creator, and incredible faithfulness. I realize the more biblically literate in our midst could recount times when those two confirmed their humanity and indeed, Abraham and Peter showed their vulnerable and fragile sides. On more than one occasion, each needed firm reminders of God's dominion and God's definition of what is truly possible!

One of the blessings of Scripture is that with the exception of Jesus, there isn't another perfect person in the whole cast of characters. These are believable people who faced everyday situations and problems and reacted and behaved in believable ways! God's continued love for them despite their all too human behavior sends a clear and strong message that God continues to love all of us, no matter what, as well!

In today's reading from Genesis, we remember how God told Abraham that he and Sarah would parent a son. Abraham was ninety-nine years old. Sarah was ninety. Would we not be more than a tad doubtful that a child could be born at that point in peoples' lives? Are Abraham and Sarah's reactions not typical? When told of Isaac's impending birth, Abraham laughed in the presence of God. Sarah laughed as well.

The secretary of the United Church of Warsaw was a Sarah Eck who started work at the church at the age of 43 and worked for the next 46 years until she was just shy of her ninetieth birthday. She didn't blink when I introduced computers to the office; indeed told her friends that learning to use a computer – and she used it well – was fun. Fun was not the operative word for her whenever she thought of this reading from Genesis. She would talk about her namesake Sarah's laugh. Sarah Eck, who by the time she was ninety had great-grandchildren, claimed the idea of having a child at that age would indeed engender laughter. As I shared once before, she insisted it would sound like this “ha, ha, ha, huh, huh, huh, uh, uh, uh, no, no, no, cry” [sardonic laughter that trails into tears].

God was not put off by Abraham and Sarah's doubts, their laughter or their preconceptions of what was humanly possible. As God promised, Isaac was born to Abraham and Sarah “in their old age” and all Jews trace their ancestry back to them. That God loved these two there was no doubt, but God would not allow their preconceptions to stand in the way of the fulfillment of God's wishes and God's promises.

Then we have the episode as recounted in the Gospel of Mark. With the exception of when Peter publicly denied knowing Jesus on the night of Christ's arrest, this is the low point of this disciple's relationship with our LORD. When Jesus told His followers that

The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again, ... Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him.

Just think - no picture in your mind's eye that scene! Peter rebukes Jesus. Jesus, in turn, rebukes Peter and claims that this first among equals of His disciples is acting on behalf of none other than Satan! Strong words! But here is the juxtaposition: Peter's preconceptions of what it meant for Jesus to be the Messiah mirrored that of nearly *everyone* of his day! Being a Messiah, being LORD, being the Son of God, ... as defined by humans, that did not involve *rejection*, much less *death*! Did not "Messiah" mean the throne of David, the re-creation of that kingdom of a thousand years before, pomp, circumstance if not enthronement in Jerusalem, good riddance to the rubbish of Roman rule and all those who connived with the invaders, the beginning of the reign of God?

Even after the rebuke, just think of how God's definitions and God's promises were presented as challenges to human preconceptions! Remember what else Jesus preached to them that day!

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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

The point is that God invites us to embrace the promises of grace, hope, fellowship, faith, reconciliation, love, joy, and peace. We are invited to hear the promise and assurance that with God *all things are possible*. And yet, we as humans continue to insist on having preconceptions, insist on seeing and doing things our way if not the same old way, and laugh in sardonic if not scornful ways when we are challenged to think much less behave differently!

Just think of those who scoff when persons want to talk of substantive change in society or of a new and glorious day dawning when it comes to relations among peoples and nations! Think of those who were scornful of the cry in the middle of the nineteenth century for an end of slavery (they even used Scripture to defend the ownership of one person by another – arguing that since slavery existed in Jesus' day it must have been sanctioned by God!)? History tells us of how people in this land mocked the likes of Susan B. Anthony and all those who worked so hard for the basic right of women to vote. In our own life times, we think of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. and countless and often nameless persons who worked to end segregation, of Nelson Mandela and F.W. de Klerck who together ended apartheid in South Africa, of Richard Nixon who opened the door to China, of Jimmy Carter who invited Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin to Camp David, ...

And then there is Jim Johnson. Jim Johnson? Mr. Johnson is the coach of the Greece Athena High School varsity basketball team whose simple act was to let a young man, relatively short in stature, named Jason McElwain - to let this young man who was the team manager, play in the final game of his senior year. Now the 20 points scored by Jason, short in stature and with autism is national news. Hopefully, whoever makes a movie about this local event won't change the facts or the outcome: he missed his first two shots and there is no state championship in the

offing for the team. The significance of the story is found in the disruption of and challenge to preconceptions, the insistence some people have in categorizing persons by their supposed mental ability or their physical stature. At 5'6", J-Mac is the same height as I.

The story of J-Mac certainly has its entertaining elements. He scored those 20 points, not 21 because he stepped *on* the 3-point line on one occasion. And then there was the next game when Greece Athena played Aquinas. With half the crowd yelling, "we've got J-Mac, we've got J-Mac," the fans of the Christian school came back with "we've got Jesus, we've got Jesus!" What a scene!

Preconceptions, pre-judgments, fixed ideas and notions, ... who of us does not live each day with all too many of those driving us at the very core of our being? And, ... who of us does not need those preconceptions challenged, particularly when they run up against the promises and graces of our God? With God's seemingly unbelievable promise to Abraham and Sarah about the birth of Isaac as a backdrop and Peter and Jesus' exchange of rebukes over the definition of Messiah, ... who of us does not feel the twinge of a challenge?

Who has not wondered if peace – world peace, peace among factions in our own country, peace in the midst of strife-torn families – if peace is not some elusive if not a noble but unachievable goal? We look at the Middle East and how often the retort to prayers for peace is: "they [that wonderful, nebulous 'they'] – they have been fighting for thousands of years, so how do we think they will stop now?" In Northern Ireland or in Central America, in the Darfur region of the Sudan and elsewhere on the African continent, in Sri Lanka, in countless other places, the conflicts – so often between the "haves" and the "have-nots" have persisted for only a hundred or perhaps a dozen or so years, but the same preconception reigns – "people are people and until the kingdom comes, there will be no peace."

Imagine, ... just imagine for a moment, if that had been the approach of abolitionists in the nineteenth century, the attitude of those who worked for voter reform or civil rights or an end to apartheid in the twentieth, or the mindset of everyone today when it comes to relations between Palestinians and Israelis, between Pakistanis and Indians, ... and in all too many instances, among peoples in our communities if not between or among family members, if not in situations that are our personal own?

Does not the promise of a son to Abraham and Sarah "in their old age" remind us of the promise of God to make all things new, to, if you will, "birth" new ideas and new approaches that can shake us at the very core of our preconceptions, have us look at people with new, faith-filled eyes, hear them with newly un-stopped ears and embrace the invitation of Christ to take up our cross, follow our LORD, find ways to reach out to people in need, discover all the more venues to minister to persons and deny if not reject the calls of the world to possess more and more and yet more so that we will *really* hear Jesus stunning words:

For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

- For those around the world if not in our own nation, for whom power and might are the ultimate measures of success, will they hear the implicit question that comes from God that asks: what will it profit a nation to rule the over others if not the whole world and forfeit its life if not its soul?

- For those around the world if not in our own backyard, for whom more and more things are the measure of accomplishment, ... will they hear the promise of God that in self-denial there will be divine gain? Did we listen to the words we sang in our second hymn? Do we now, in retrospect, see them as mirroring the words Jesus spoke to Peter and the other disciples?

O Master, let me walk with Thee, in lowly paths of service free; tell me Thy secret, help me bear, the strain of toil, the fret of care.

- For those around the world if not in our own lives, for whom the promises of God seem too distant, too “out-there,” too demanding, too different from our determined view of things, will they, OK, will *we* hear the promise of God to Abraham and Sarah about the birth of Isaac, the promises of God through Christ that in loss there would be gain, that in service there would be glory, and that in the cross there would be triumph, ... or will we wallow in our preconceptions, drown in our human-driven doubts, and die, yes die, in our empty attempts at what we think is abundant living because we refuse to embrace the abundance that is fulfilled in the promises of God. Will we, like Peter, through our actions if not our words rebuke our LORD because His definitions are too hard or perhaps too ludicrous for us to even consider?

Having heard the timeless and timely words of Scripture – who can’t be challenged by the promises of God? I am. I think you are as well.

Amen.