

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

Grace to you and Peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

We had the Council Retreat today. That's part of the reason why the room is not quite set up exactly the way it usually is for Saturday night. The font is in the wrong place and front rows aren't curved the way I like to have them. It also is the reason that I'm going to be rather disjointed for the next few minutes, because I didn't have all day to sit and craft this (I know, you might be surprised that I actually spend a whole day working on my messages). But it was a very good council retreat. We had most of the council members there as well as the chairs and several committee members of the various committees that we have in the congregation. There were probably 40+ people there all together. We had some really good conversation. We spent the morning talking about discipleship: What is discipleship; How does it apply to our lives; What does being a disciple and making disciples have to do with the leadership here at Trinity? Because, as we just voted as a congregation just this last weekend, as part of our vision and mission statement – Disciples in the making, making disciples – is what we at Trinity are going to strive to be doing.

What does any of that have to do with our lessons as we heard them today? Our lessons, as we heard the story of Abram and Sarai, Abraham and Sarah as their names are changed, the story of these two people who are called by faith. They are called by faith – as we heard in our reading from Genesis tonight – they are called by faith. An interesting little aside that I learned is that in all of the letters of Paul, Abraham is the second most mentioned Biblical figure, second only to Jesus. Now some Pauline scholars would say “Well, of course Paul would mention Abraham so often because Abraham was such a work's righteousness kind of guy. God told him to do something, so he picked up his family and he moved them. God told Abraham and Sarah that all males need to be circumcised, so all of Abraham's household were circumcised. So, they were called to God's favor because they were so into the works of God. They were striving to please God through all the things that they did.”

But Paul, if you listen to what Paul wrote, Paul didn't say that Abraham and Sarah were called and justified by their **works**. In the book of Romans, Paul says that Abraham and Sarah are called because of their **faith**. Abraham, for his part, even though God said to him that he “walk before” God and “be blameless,” which is all part of that first covenant. They are called because of faith.

But what does it mean to be called by faith and not because of the work that we do? If we listen to the Gospel lesson, part of that being called by faith means we are going to suffer. That's what we get in our Gospel lesson. We have Jesus talking to the disciples. Jesus says to the disciples that the Son of Man – meaning himself – the Son of Man has to suffer. And Peter – I love Peter, especially in Mark's Gospel, he reminds me of this Labrador retriever always going “ooh, ooh, ooh, Lord.” Jesus says “the Son of Man has to suffer.” Peter says, “Oh, Lord, wait! Stop! Shut up for a minute!” That's a paraphrase of the Greek word there, where it says that Peter *rebuked*

Jesus. It's a very strong word. It says, "Jesus, come over here! What are you talking about? You can't go off and suffer!"

Jesus turns around to him with the same strong language. He's giving him the verbal "dope slap." "Get behind me, Satan, Jesus said. "You don't know, Peter, you don't know what the Son of Man has to go through. You don't know. You don't understand. You've only heard this wonderful stuff that I have been talking to you about, Peter. You've only heard that I've been talking about how much God loves us." But just because God loves us doesn't mean that our life will be without suffering. Just because God loves us doesn't mean we are always going to be on Easy Street. Just because God loves us doesn't mean that our 401Ks are not going to tank. It doesn't mean we'll always have enough money to pay our bills. It doesn't mean that people we love and care for won't ever get sick.

If we think that we won't suffer just because we believe, then what was Jesus' death on the cross about? Remember, as he hung there between those two criminals – remember how the one criminal starts to belittle him and make fun of him. Remember all the people who were gathered at the foot of the cross were hollering obscenities to him. "Yeah, you think you're the Son of God. Get off of there, if you are." If Jesus had to suffer, do I think that I'm better than Jesus that I won't have to suffer?

There is suffering in this world, and it's a sad and unfortunate truth. I know there are people who struggle with that. "Well, how can there be a God if there really is suffering?" Or as I read the other day – one guy is complaining to another and says "You know when I die and I stand before God I'm going to ask God, 'You know with all this pain and suffering and hunger in the world, you could have done something about it. Why didn't you?' And his friend turns to him and says, 'I'm afraid God would ask me that same question.'"

There is suffering in this world because we live in a world that is not perfect. There's suffering in this world because this is not yet the perfect promised world that God talks about, that our scripture talks about. This is not the world to which we will be going.

Now with Abraham and Sarah - Remember, they were given a promise. We heard that promise tonight. They were given a promise, a covenant – it's the second covenant in the Bible. They are given this covenant and in this promise they are asked to pick up from where they are living, travel hundreds of miles through foreign countries where they could be killed, where they could be robbed. They are given this promise of descendants. They were not young when they had this promise given to them. Moreover, after the promise of having children comes to them, they have to wait twelve, fifteen years until that promise comes to fruition. In this age that we live in, in this culture of instant gratification, I have trouble waiting for the shirt that I just ordered from LL Bean to arrive at the end of the week. I know people who get impatient because they can't wait until tonight for that pay-per-view show to come on television. Can you even imagine waiting *fifteen years* to be given a child that you so long for? That child that has been promised to you. That child that you don't really see how it's going to happen because he's pushing 100 and she's long past menopause. What could cause someone to possibly think that God is going keep that promise? Can we say "by faith"?

The afternoon speaker at our retreat today was Rev. Paul Peel from First Lutheran Church in Colorado Springs, Colorado. He talked about his congregation, which is about the same size as Trinity. They've got about 2200 members. They have five times of worship each week. They've got an average weekly attendance of about 850. We have five times of worship a week. We've got average attendance of about 820 each week. We have about 2600 baptized members on our books. But at First Lutheran in Colorado Springs, they don't have committees. When someone sees a need within the congregation, they get permission from the board of directors (they don't have a council, they call it a board of directors), they get permission from the board of directors to recruit other members from the congregation and they respond to that need. They put their *faith* into *action*. And their action helps strengthen their faith. Those actions are not what saves them. Just as Abraham and Sarah's obedience to the Lord God Almighty is not what saved them either. What is important to the folks at First Lutheran in Colorado Springs is the same thing that should be important to us. The thing that we are called to have first in our life: Faith. Faith, that we are called; faith that we are sent; faith that we are to serve our Lord in all that we do no matter what is going on in our lives. We all are called to faith. Amen.