

CCUM - 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent  
1 March 2015

### God's covenant with Abraham

17 When Abram was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am El Shaddai (the Holy Mountain) Walk with me and be trustworthy. 2 I will make a covenant between us and I will give you many, many descendants." 3 Abram fell on his face (laughing), and God said to him, 4 "But me, my covenant is with you; you will be the ancestor of many nations. 5 And because I have made you the ancestor of many nations, your name will no longer be Abram[b] but Abraham.[c] 6 I will make you very fertile. I will produce nations from you, and kings will come from you. 7 I will set up my covenant with you and your descendants after you in every generation as an enduring covenant. I will be your God and your descendants' God after you. 8 I will give you and your descendants the land in which you are immigrants, the whole land of Canaan, as an enduring possession. And I will be their God."

9 God said to Abraham, "As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants in every generation.

15 God said to Abraham, "As for your wife Sarai, you will no longer call her Sarai. Her name will now be Sarah. 16 I will bless her and even give you a son from her. I will bless her so that she will become nations, and kings of peoples will come from her."

Al and I just returned from a six day trip to San Diego to visit my parents who are 87 and 89. Each visit becomes more bittersweet. My parents are finding life more and more challenging.

As I visited with them, and have thought this week about my message for this morning, I couldn't help consider legacy. We all ask this question, "What I am contributing? What am I leaving for those who follow?" and of course, we each need to answer these for ourselves. On this trip, I thought about some of those things that I have received from my parents.

My mother has given us all dedication and commitment. She was totally focused on her roles of wife and mother. Family was number one. She was selfless. She gave us a sense of curiosity as she was always reading, until very recently. She also gave me a sense of fearlessness when it comes to thunder and lightning and

fireworks. When we lived in the Bahamas when I was only one and two years old, there were major tropical thunderstorms. The lightning would hit very nearby and immediately flash and boom. She would hold me at the window and we would clap with glee...I still very much love thunder and fireworks today. She also would ride my noise sensitive little sister around on the vacuum cleaner so she would be less afraid of its loud groaning. My mother loves talking about her childhood. So we look at old photos and hear stories from her past. She certainly has given us a sense of place... as she shares about where and who she came from... she knows what gifts she has received from her parents.

My dad was always a hard working provider. He passionately loved his work as an engineer and scientist. He passed on his value for education. He always marched to his own drummer.... and passed on this sense of independence to me. He has a strong streak of persistence and determination. He always worked very hard for the things he has been able to accomplish.

Both of my parents demonstrated resilience. No matter what hard times they may have experienced, they bounced back. They have persevered. They have always demonstrated great affection and respect for each other. They are best friends.

We are all of us a mix of nature.... our genetics and nurture.... our experiences and the things we have learned from others. Sometimes our lessons have been very positive.... when we want to do something just like that other person, and hopefully have similar success.... And sometimes we are sure that the opposite is true.... we have learned that we do NOT want to follow in their ways exactly. We feel compelled to make our own choices.

Many of us have heard the story of the Sunday ham that grandma would make. She passed this tradition on to her daughter.... and grand daughter. One day the grand daughter asked her mother, why do we make the Sunday ham this way, cutting it in half before putting it into the pan. Her mother said, "I don't know, that's the way my mother always did it." So they asked grandma why she did

this. And she said, “Well, we had a small oven and a small pan, so I needed to cut it in half so it would fit in the oven.” Even though they were now cooking in large modern ovens, and had amply large pans, they were still cutting the ham in half. We all have traditions and practices that we continue to this day.

In our scripture this morning, we hear again some of the story of Abraham and Sarah. This story is told during Lent because it illustrates how God is working to reconcile us and reestablish relationship with the people through Abraham. And one of God’s promises was surely fulfilled with a lasting legacy. Abraham was told he would be “the ancestor of many nations.”

Abraham is in fact a significant figure in three of the major world religions, called the Abrahamic religions. The largest Abrahamic religions are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Judaism regards itself as the religion of the descendants of Jacob, a grandson of Abraham and dates back to the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE. The central holy book that tells the story of the early prophets including Abraham and his descendants is primarily the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures or Old Testament which derives from the oral Torah.

Christianity began as a sect of Judaism - because Jesus was a Jew and then His followers evolved His message into a separate religion —the Christian Church— after Jesus’ death.

Islam arose in Arabia in the 7th century CE following Abrahams belief in the One God. Muslims hold the Qur'an to be the ultimate authority, as revealed through the teachings and practices of a central, but not divine prophet, Muhammad, believed to be a descendant of Ishmael, son of Abraham and Hagar.

For each of these three religions, Abraham is a central figure. God revealed himself to Abraham who then demonstrated his unwavering belief in God,

rejecting the idolatry of his people. And he steadfastly turned to God and fulfilled God's commandments.

Sarah was the wife of Abraham. Hagar was the servant of Sarah. God had promised Abraham many descendants, but, ten years after the promise, Sarah was still unable to have children. As they were already old, Sarah chose to give her servant Hagar to Abraham, in accordance with the custom of day, so that Sarah could have a child through her (Genesis 16:2) like surrogate pregnancy..

Hagar conceived, and had Ishmael. Sarah was jealous of her, so Hagar fled to the desert to escape the resentment of her mistress. This story is full of pathos and intrigue, mistakes and surprises, including... Later, God fulfilled His promise to Abraham and Sarah. Sarah gave birth to a son named Isaac (Genesis 21). I'm not even touching that she was said to be 90 at the time!

But, these people are all important characters in our faith traditions. Through both of his sons, Abraham fulfilled his legacy - God's promise - and was in fact the ancestor of many people.

This unlikely family story is one readers would expect to end badly. Yet God keeps promises; Isaac became the son of promise through whom the tribes of Israel would arise. Hagar's son, Ishmael, also became a great leader. Regardless of how a situation looks from a [our] perspective, God [can still] work to fulfill promises.

[Http://www.gotquestions.org/Sarah\\_Hagar.html#ixzz3T5od3hi0](http://www.gotquestions.org/Sarah_Hagar.html#ixzz3T5od3hi0)

What do you want to pass on to your grandchildren? What will you give to future generations? (Adam Copeland)

Many of us have been given treasured things from grandparents or even earlier ancestors: Books, furniture, jewelry. We value these reminders from previous generations. And we want to pass them on to willing and eager recipients. I have many old photos I hope someone will cherish after I'm gone. We have been given personality gifts and talents as well -

As we move through this season of Lent, we take time for personal reflection and individual examination. The emphasis of Genesis 17, however, is less on Abraham and Sarah's personal "getting right with God" than on God's good gifts to their progeny for generations to come. (Adam Copeland)

God covenanted with Abraham and Sarah in an ongoing way, and we, too, are inheritors of God's blessing. That blessing continues beyond ourselves, beyond this current generation to future generations as well.

One thought about legacy is - What would happen if this Lent in addition to reflecting personally and spiritually we also took a broader view? For example, what if we took seriously the evidence of climate change. What if we took seriously that we humans are using up resources faster than the earth can renew them? What if we chose to consider ways that we could radically change our ways and be more faithful stewards of the earth and its creatures.

God's good blessings always call for faithful response. With our financial resources, we're called to care for others. With our beloved faith communities, we're called to welcome in God's name. With God's gifts of creation, we're called to steward for generations to come. This Lent, with Abraham and Sarah, [what if] we seek to pass on a world in which God's blessings of love, acceptance, and hope continue forevermore. (Adam Copeland)

There are many ways to look at the legacy... the promises we may be passing on. I heard this week of a legacy that has had lasting, significant effect was from Leonard Nimoy who passed away a few days ago. When he was a boy, he was with his father, grandfather and brother at services and five or six men were up in front of the congregation. They started chanting. Leonard had been told to not look, so they had put their hands over their eyes as they listened. He heard a strange wailing sound. And he couldn't resist, he peeked. And he saw the men

with their hands out making this sign....a blessing.

When he was an adult playing Spock, they were given a lovely script where Spock was to meet other Vulcans for the first time. He told the director he thought they needed some kind of greeting, like a wave or a nod or a handshake or salute, something that all Vulcans would understand. Leonard suggested this.... And a meaning, “Live long and prosper.” The director said great. Leonard said it took off immediately and became part of the culture. Within a few days of the show airing, people would see him out in public and flash the Vulcan greeting... Nimoy said, people didn’t realize they were blessing each other. He passed on a holy family experience in a lasting legacy..... “Live Long and Prosper.”

Barbara Brown Taylor has reflected on Abraham and Sarah in this way -

“Abram and Sarai have not been sitting still through this long period. They have had ample opportunity to learn to trust God without knowing for sure how things will turn out. This trust led them to leave their home in Haran without a map to the land of promise. It allowed them to endure the grim vision of what lay in store for their descendants in the land of Egypt. This old couple is deeply flawed, yet they have remained faithful to God’s promise. Their trust is unconditional. In years to come, three distinct religions will spring from this trust, claiming Abraham as their grandfather in faith. Their grandmothers (Sarah and Hagar) will be different, but not their covenant with God. God will be their God, and they will be God’s people.” (Barbara Brown Taylor)

During Lent we are invited to spend forty days examining the nature of our covenant with God. Upon what does that relationship depend? What has been passed down to us from our ancestors? What do we trust here and now to give us life? What practices allow us to become more closely connected with God? What new purpose might God have in mind for us?

Lent is a time to repent, to reconnect and return to God. Like Abraham who criticized those who worshiped multiple Gods, we too are asked to turn toward the one God, creator, unifying “ground of all being” (John Spong)

Today, we remember the legacy that has been handed down to us. And we thank God for those who came before who continue to offer us strength for our journey.... And may we live long and prosper.