

Lent 2-B  
February 25, 2018  
St. John's Cathedral

Some of us here at the Cathedral have been keeping a simple prayer journal this Lent as we work our way through some of the New Testament writings attributed to John the Evangelist – the gospel and sometimes the epistles. We get about one verse a day to reflect on – through writing down some thoughts, quietly pondering the passage, or perhaps finding some other creative expression like poetry or photography to respond. On Sundays we gather in the Great Hall to share our thoughts.

If nothing else, this process has challenged me to listen more carefully to God – in this case through exploring this tiny piece of scripture every day. It has also caused me to really appreciate the journeys of others as we gather on Sundays.

Today's scripture reading from Genesis gives us a different picture of listening to God in a story about Abraham and Sarah, people who we always meet in our readings for the second Sunday in Lent. Abraham – more than 90 years old at the time of this conversation with God, is patriarch of Israel. This is just one of several of his conversations with God that we read in Genesis. Two important ones come before this one. In the first one, God (who does most of the talking in the conversations) tells Abram (as he was known then) to take his wife Sarai and their clan, pack up all of their stuff, leave the cousins behind and go to a place that was unknown to them. A place of God's own choosing. There's a promise in that

conversation, too. God promises that Abram, Sarai and their descendants will be blessed and will also be a blessing to future generations.

In another conversation, God repeats the promises in the first one, then assures Abraham that he will have a son who will be his heir.

In both of these conversations, God made a covenant with Abram– an agreement that was binding. It was a deal that could and would not be broken. So these are important and solemn conversations.

Today, in the third one, God makes another covenant: That Abram will be the ancestor of a multitude of nations – and he gives Abram and Sarai new names and announces that they will begin being the ancestors of these nations by becoming parents. This elderly couple is going to become pregnant. (Interestingly, we don't hear Sarah's response to this news which is to laugh at it.)

Admittedly, these stories come from the early history of God's people – almost a pre-history. They are stories from long ago and far away. Set in a time and in a place where we have not been. Maybe our visiting these stories is a little like times in our own families when we look at those faded, black and white photos in a family album. There is a connection, but we don't always have a lot of detail.

I chose this passage today because Lent for many of us is a time when we are a bit more attentive to how we listen to God – to have a more intentional prayer life.

If nothing else, these conversations with God in Genesis help us to remember that God comes close to us. Has a kind of intimacy with us and the circumstances of our lives. We need to keep talking to God – but more importantly, we need to keep listening, too. That's probably the harder part.

There is something to glean, too, in the part of the story where God gives Abram and Sarai new names: Abraham and Sarah. Abraham means “ancestor of a multitude” and Sarah means “princess” -- perhaps foremother of royalty. This is a whole new chapter for them and for the people of God. They have new roles – a new purpose as the ancestors of generations and generations of God’s people.

Maybe this reminds us that God gives us new starts – new opportunities. Sometimes at such pivotal times people take new names. I remember a man in a former parish who changed his name from Dale to Otis after feeling that God had given him a whole new insight and a whole new path. People in religious life – monks and nuns – often take a new name when they make vows to God and their community. It is an important transition in identity. .

Whether we take a new name or not, we remember that there are those places where God calls us to new responsibilities and relationships. Times when we move ahead in new ways—ways that perhaps we did not anticipate. Sometimes God asks us, as he asked Abraham, to leave something behind and go to a new place – literally or figuratively. And most importantly, God is with us in those journeys.

Another key piece in this reading today is the sort of surprise ending when God tells Abraham and Sarah that they are going to be parents to a son. This wouldn’t be such startling news if it weren’t for their age. While I wouldn’t be inclined to take these ages literally, Abraham is described as 99 when this occurs and Sarah is 90. We are to understand, though, that they are becoming pregnant at a time when most people (should they live so long) are thinking about assisted living.

There are many things here that are worth noting, but the one that just seems to cry out to us is that sense of surprise. I'm not sure I would be jumping for joy if I became pregnant in my 90s, but in the context of this story it is a great blessing not just for Abraham and Sarah but for their descendants as well. God will provide the child who will begin the next generation in a whole succession of generations. It is really the embodiment of life and hope.

I think the take-away in this part of the story is to remember is that our God is a god of surprises. Our lives aren't perfectly predictable or events that unfold in a straight line. Surprise invades every day and we might well be on our toes. How has God surprised you? I know there have been some amazing surprises in my life, not the least of which is how I was once a newspaper reporter and am now a priest. Who would have thought! Who knows what will be next!

Abraham and Sarah's journey was long ago and far away for sure. But it is still like a part of our family album – the story of our spiritual ancestors. A story that connects with ours. Abraham's conversations with God really do inform ours, I think. What do we say to God? What does God say to us? And perhaps most importantly, Are we listening?