

St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA
The Rev. Alexander Breckinridge
Church Year A
3/12/17 — Lent 2
Genesis 12:1-9, John 3:1-17

“OK, God, here’s the deal. I promise that if you’ll do (fill in the blank), then I’ll do (fill in the blank).” And you’ve done that, haven’t you? Come on sure you have! Bargained with God. Negotiated with God. It starts out at an early age. “Please God, if you’ll let me get an “A” on this Algebra test (which, by the way, I haven’t studied for all that much) then I promise I’ll be a better boy.”

Bargaining with God. It gets a little more serious the older we get. “OK God, here’s the deal. If you’ll only make this cancer go away, I promise I’ll be a better priest, husband, father, friend, etc.” On and on we go. Trying to cut a deal with God.

Such a normal human reaction to the pains of grief and the fear of loss. The great psychotherapist, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross identified the five stages of grief many years ago. When faced with any kind of tragedy like death or a scary diagnosis, we often have a grief reaction and it happens, Kubler- Ross says, in five stages.

First comes denial “No. This can’t possibly be happening. We were going to live together forever.” Second comes anger. “How can this be happening? I didn’t do anything to deserve this.”

Third comes bargaining. “Oh God, if you’ll just make me better, I promise to be a better person.” Next is depression. “God, you weren’t listening. You must not be there at all. I’m alone in the Universe” And, finally, at last, acceptance. “OK, this is my new reality. Like it or not, time to get on with life.”

So while bargaining with God doesn’t seem to be a winning strategy on its own, it might actually be an important part of a process which leads us out of the fantasy of denial into the reality of our present moment which, after all, is the only place we will meet God. Right here, right now. In the midst of real life.

So why am I making a big deal about bargaining with God and what a loser that is here on the 2nd Sunday in Lent? Because it helps us to understand something of vital importance about the nature of God and about this important story of the calling of Abraham. In fact, I would go so far as to say that the whole Bible turns on this story. Now that’s a big claim so let’s see if I can back it up.

You remember last week we heard the story of Adam & Eve in the Garden. The story of the first interaction with God did not go all that well for the man and the woman. Given

everything necessary for their flourishing, they couldn't follow one simple instruction. Steer clear of the fruit of the Tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil. But the sneaky snake seduced them with the temptation to be like God. To judge between good and evil. To place themselves on the throne and to dismiss God to irrelevance. Didn't work out too well for them. And then the next eight chapters of Genesis describe the various creative ways human beings devised to disappoint God. Brother killing brother. Conspiring to build a tower reaching all the way to Heaven so once again the human beings could try to be like God. Even the one human being whom God chose to keep the show going after God decided to use the flood to start all over again, Old Noah, disappoints God by getting drunk and lying naked in his tent, which then leads his family to ruin.

So God decides to go in a different direction, as they say. God decides to get very specific and personal. To focus on a couple of unlikely individuals in order to make the Creation whole again. A 75-year-old childless goatherder named Abraham and his barren wife Sarah will now be the bearers of God's promises. As I said, a very unlikely couple, yet through them, we'll see the three major theses of the Hebrew Scripture emerge: call, covenant, journey.

So God begins by calling Abraham. And calls him to go to a strange place, an unnamed, unknown place. The call just comes out of the blue. Abraham doesn't expect it or ask for it. It just comes. And the call brings with it a promise. "I will make of you a great nation and I will **bless you and through you all the nations of the world will be blessed.**" And the promise is a great deal for Abraham because he and Sarah in their old age lacked the most important commodity one could have in that culture – Sons. But the promise isn't just for him and for Sarah. It's for the whole world. They just get to be the bearers of the promise. Of course, this story about promise is also going to be a story about failure and a story about faithfulness. The failure by Abraham and Sarah and their descendants to be worthy of the promises on the one hand and the faithfulness of God on the other to keep after them, inviting them over and over back into these promises, back into the covenant, every time they blow it.

And then there's the third piece. The Journey. The call comes. The promise, the covenant is made but it takes a journey in order for the promise to be fulfilled. We see it beginning here. Abraham and Sarah will go from Haran, which is in modern-day Iraq, all the way across Fertile Crescent, down into Egypt and then back again. Lots of adventure and disappointment and frustration along the way, until finally in their great old age, they have a son together, Isaac. And from Isaac comes Jacob and from Jacob comes 12 sons who become the 12 tribes of Israel, and they each have their own journeys to make and their descendants have a journey too – one lasting 40 years, from Egypt into the wilderness and on to the promised land.

And then, down through the generations, a very distant ancestor, a man named Jesus, son of Mary and Joseph, hears his own call “You are my son, my beloved, in you I am very pleased.”

He hears the promise, the blessing, that through him and through his life, all human beings, all Creation, for all time will be blessed. But first there’s a journey. In to the wilderness for 40 days to confront the Evil One. Up to Jerusalem and Golgotha to confront the forces of Empire. Out from the tomb and then on to Galilee where the promise of new life in the Resurrection is made real.

Each one of us today bears witness to this call and their promise. In the midst of a divided and conflicted world, in the midst of war and hunger and injustice and pain, we hear God calling our names and calling us into covenant, making a promise to us, and calling us on a journey of our own. Call, covenant, journey. A whole lot different from bargaining with God. “God, are you there? Hey, if you do this, I’ll do that.” See how it just doesn’t work that way?

The death of a loved one is real. Cancer is real. So is hatred and conflict, disappointment and the pain of loss. We can’t wish them away through magical thinking and bargaining. What we can do is live through them with hope and faith and courage. We’ve been called on a journey, a journey with a purpose. And the purpose and the promise of our journey is wholeness and healing and new life. Lent is the time to slow down, to stop, to pay attention to the call. Lent is the time to explore the promise. To really hear what the promise means.

The promise doesn’t mean we get everything we want. That’s our magical thinking about bargaining with God. The promise means we get what we actually need. A relationship. A connection to something larger than we are, a purpose beyond our own egoic desires. We are promised a relationship with the source of life through Christ. And through Christ, real and lasting and positive relationships with our sisters and brothers. But we do have to respond. We can’t just sit on our backsides waiting and waiting. We have to show up. We have to go on the journey. It’s time to get moving. A journey of 1000 miles begins with the first step. Amen.