Lent 2

February 28, 2021

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Mark 8:31-38

Our book group is in the midst of reading *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, by John Irving. At one point in the story, a minister talks about how faith and doubt go hand-in-hand, suggesting that you can’t have faith if you don’t have some doubt now and then.

But doubt makes us uncomfortable. It can make us feel like we’re somehow not doing our faith right, or not a “good enough” Christian. When we encounter people who claim they don’t have any doubts about God, their certainty can be overwhelming, even discouraging.

And that’s a shame, because I think that fictional minister is right. Faith and doubt *do* go hand-in-hand. I think doubt is our struggle to conform our understanding of God with what we experience in the world around us.

When how we understand God doesn’t fit with what we experience, doubt happens.

But when we find our way to placing our trust in God, even when it’s hard, then we find a renewed sense of hope and faith.

Abram and Sarai had been promised a child in their old age. But by the time we get to the Genesis text we hear today, 25 years have passed. And they were old when God first made the promise. Now they’re *really* old, and the idea of someone as old as Sarai having a baby seemed ridiculous, even impossible.

As the years passed, Abram and Sarai found it hard to trust in God’s promise when it didn’t come to fruition in what seemed to them to be a reasonable amount of time. Their doubt led them to act instead of waiting for God to act, trusting that God *would* act, leading them to make some bad choices and hurt innocent people.

And yet, God still returns to them. Abram is renamed Abraham, Sarai is renamed Sarah. God reiterates the promise — they *will* have a baby and their descendants would include kings.

Despite their struggle to trust in God, despite the trouble that occurs because of that lack of trust, Abraham is *still* lifted up as a model of faith for trusting God’s promises and trying to act on that trust. Because even though they got it wrong sometimes, Abraham and Sarah continued to grow in their faith and their ability to trust in God.

Even when we struggle to believe, even when we’re tempted to take matters into our own hands rather than wait for God to act, God doesn’t give up on the promises God makes to us.

Our Gospel reading for today offers us another example of wavering faith. Just prior to today’s passage, Peter professes his faith in Jesus. When Jesus asks the 12, “Who do *you* say I am,” Peter boldly declares, “You’re the messiah!”

But then Jesus start telling the disciples things they didn’t want to hear. “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.”

Mark tells us that Peter pulled Jesus aside and began to rebuke him.

In response, Jesus rebukes Peter. And then he tells the crowd that they need to deny themselves if they’re going to be his followers.

Sadly, Jesus’ words about denying ourselves and taking up our crosses have all too often been misused over the centuries to justify allowing — even encouraging — people to suffer in the name of faith.

Denying ourselves is about giving up the ways we cling to *who we are* in favor of who God knows we can be, who God *created* us to be. And it’s about giving up our notions about how and when God should act, and letting God be God.

And taking up our crosses is about refusing to back away from joining in the work Jesus did to bring wholeness to others.

Jesus’ ministry found resistance from those who were invested in the status quo, those who didn’t want to see things change for fear it would mean they didn’t get to be on top anymore. But Jesus insisted that all people are worthy and loved by God, that all people are deserving of respect. He insisted that we replace our desire for power and wealth with a passion for justice and peace.

And because he refused to back away from the work he did to bring wholeness and acceptance and grace to those who were neglected and dismissed as unimportant, because he refused to back down from his message of peace and justice, those who were invested in the status quo insisted Jesus had to be stopped, that he had to die.

But guess who Jesus said would be the rock upon whom the church would be formed? Who would be one of the key people to keep Jesus’ work going after Jesus’ ascension?

Peter.

The same Peter who dared to rebuke Jesus. The same Peter who leapt out of the boat to walk on the water and began to sink when he let his fears overwhelm his trust in Jesus. The same Peter who boldly declared he’d *never* betray Jesus or deny knowing him, but then did just that.

Like Abraham and Sarah, Peter shows us that our wavering faith is not an insurmountable obstacle for God, and it does not preclude us from being instruments of God’s peace and love in the world in the future

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It can be hard for us to trust God, especially when God allows things to happen in ways that we don’t necessarily agree with, or when it seems like it’s taking too long for God to fulfill a promise.

Abraham and Sarah and Peter remind us that, when we deny ourselves the job of deciding how God should do things, *that’s* when the really good stuff can happen.

Like the cycles of the moon, our faith will wax and wane. There will be times it feels like God’s presence shines in our lives like a full moon on a clear night. And there will be times when it feels like God is hidden in the shadows.

I think that, if we’re honest with ourselves, we’ll always have doubts. But the mere fact that we doubt is a sign of hope. It means we haven’t given up on our faith. It means we’re still trying to find signs of God’s presence, still trying to conform our will to God’s will, our hearts to God’s heart.

As we work our way through our doubts, we find ourselves with a new understanding of who God is and how God works in the world. And that leads us to renewed hope, renewed trust in God’s promises.

And it leads us closer to seeing the world the way God sees it, which can’t help but change us.

May we be open to the ways God is present even in our doubts, and have hearts willing to be transformed by where God leads us.