Sermon for the 2nd Sunday in Lent

February 25, 2024

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

One of the last classes I took in college was about how history is written. Early in the class, the professor talked about how what historians choose to leave out can be as significant as what they include.

I think that applies in general to storytelling, and even to how we speak about ourselves. For example, if I meet someone and I don’t tell them that I’m hard of hearing, they’re not going to understand why I respond to the world around me as I do.

I try to be up front about my hearing loss, because it impacts how I interact with people. But I don’t go around saying, “Hi, I’m Sue. I’m hard of hearing. Lovely weather we’re having, isn’t it?”

Being hard of hearing is a significant factor in my life, but there’s more to me than just my hearing, just as there’s more to me than my role as a pastor, or as a wife. All of those things, and so many more, come together in the story that is who I am. What I choose to share of that story impacts how others understand me.

None of *us* want to be treated as if we’re one-dimensional, reduced to one characteristic, one choice, one mistake.

But it’s sometimes easy for us to treat others as if they are.

With the limited information we get about some people in the Bible, that can be a temptation. But sometimes we get enough information to help us see beyond one choice, one act, one moment in a person’s life.

Whenever I read Genesis, I’m kind of amazed by the way that the people who told these stories didn’t shy away from including the less-than-fabulous things Abraham and Sarah did –the ways they tried to take matters into their own hands when it seemed God wasn’t keeping his promise for a child, the way Sarah treated Hagar. Which means we’re offered a picture of two *very* human people.

We get to see that it’s the sameAbraham who went along with Sarah’s demand that Hagar and Ishmael be sent away, who is also declared righteous by God. We get to see Abraham speaking up when God plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, but remain silent when God asks him to sacrifice his son Isaac.

People are complicated.

And the Bible makes it hard for us to treat Abraham and Sarah as anything *but* complicated people, who were trying to be faithful, but didn’t always get it right.

But the Bible also makes it clear that being complicated people who try to be faithful but don’t always get it right isn’t a limiting factor for God.

Because it’s to Abraham and Sarah that God makes a covenant: the promise that they would be patriarch and matriarch to a line of descendants who would be as numerous as the stars in the night sky. Through them, the nations of the world would be blessed.

And, centuries later, it’s to Peter that Jesus says, “You’ll be the rock on which I build my church.”

Throughout Mark’s story, the disciples come across looking kind of clueless pretty often. Outsiders pick up on things a lot faster than they do.

Our text for today comes right after Jesus has fed the multitude, and Peter has confessed his belief that Jesus is the Messiah.

And then…

I can’t help but think Peter maybe would have preferred the evangelists had left this little bit out of their stories.

I understand why Peter didn’t want to hear about Jesus’ predictions of suffering and death, even though the predictions also came with a reassurance that Jesus would be resurrected. Things were going well, and Jesus was doing good work. And if he was the Messiah, as Peter boldly declared, then the people would be set free from oppression.

It’s easy to understand how Peter would think Jesus was going to, in some fashion, free the Israelites from Roman rule.

But that was Peter, as Jesus says, setting his mind on earthly things. Not divine things. God had other plans in mind.

And honestly, I can’t help but think that this is where Judas went astray, too. Like Peter, like Abraham and Sarah, maybe Judas had an idea for how things were going to play out, and Jesus wasn’t following his playbook. So, like Sarah does by insisting Abraham have a child with Hagar, maybe Judas was persuaded that he could do something to help things along.

By telling us all these stories, the Bible offers us examples of the people who came before us struggling to trust in God’s promises when it seems like maybe God has forgotten about them. Or maybe it’s not working out like they had thought it would. Or maybe what God promised seems impossible.

That’s one of the hard parts of being people of faith. How do we know when we’re supposed to *act*, and how do we know when we’re supposed to wait for *God* to act?

And I don’t have an easy answer for that. There’s no one-size-fits-all, bumper sticker sized, easy-to-remember answer.

Which is kind of annoying sometimes.

Maybe more than sometimes.

We pray for a sign, but then we begin to overanalyze everything we see.

We try to be patient, but then we wonder if God expects us to be *doing* something. Only we’re not quite sure what it is.

What these stories, and so many others in the Bible, tell us, though, is that we’re not always going to get a clear sign. We’re not always going to see God act according to the way we’ve imagined. We’re not always going to see God act according to our own timeline.

And I feel like instead of saying “we’re not always going” to see those things, that it maybe should be “we’re almost never going” to see them.

Just as God didn’t choose to create us as beings incapable of sin, God likewise didn’t create us as beings who will be 100% in tune with God’s plan. As beings who are able to *always* remove our fears and our need to feel some kind of control over our lives from our decision making.

God didn’t create us as one-dimensional beings. We’re capable of experiencing love and joy, anger and hate, and all kinds of things in between. We choose whether to use our gifts for the common good. We have moments when we trust in God, and moments when we don’t.

Whatever our choices, they’re met with God’s forgiveness and love ***ALWAYS***. And we’re continually invited to remember that nothing is impossible with God. What God has promised to do *will* happen.

Our task as faithful people is to trust that God will keep God’s promises. Resting in that trust, we can tend to the work each of us is called to do – loving one another as God loves us.

May God bless us with the gift of trusting in His promises, that we who are blessed may be blessings for others.