

THE BLESSING OF GENERATIONS

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Why are we here today? Yes, it’s the second Sunday of Lent – and Yes, you are usually here
Did your faith grow from the faithfulness of your great-grandparents? Perhaps we get our names from our grandparents Are we passing on our faith to following generations Do names matter; YES, Our identity matters, part of it defines us; Use Roddy Hamilton’s poem on the back of the Order of service; What connection do you have with your name?

Carolyn read the story version of Genesis 17 to us: God promised that if Abraham and all his descendants would hold true to following THE WAY of El Shaddai, (the name by which the One God was known to the Priestly writer), they would experience the faithfulness of God.

And their new names were to be the reminder of God’s promise to always be with you.

Why did they receive new names: Rabbi Morris says: you know when a newer version of our favourite yoghurt, or washing liquid is being promoted – it often says – there’s a great new ingredient” on this new improved version. So – of course - -- Sarai and Abram may well have wanted to signify that they are new people now in relationship with Yahweh -- And the H added to both their names is a sign of God’s presence in their lives, and is repeated twice in the name Yahweh.

In one way these aged people were being offered biological immortality. Do you experience yourself as included in this covenant made between God and Abraham and Sarah - And others may be included who we don’t wish to have – they are not free to do what they want, they are now in Covenant with the God whose wish is SHALOM.

Almost two bookends in our verses, v. 3 and v. 17 – Abraham fell on his face which is actually translated as he fell on his nose, and laughed – and it seems Sarah joined him in doubting, cynical laughter, the laughter of despair. The verb for Abraham’s cynical chortle or laugh – is Isaac – so the precious to-be-born child is named laughter.

The larger question of our Genesis lection reminds us that God is not confined in any ideology, and God is not some mere subject of the propaganda of the powerful or the traditionally religious.

No – here is the God of the possible impossibility – it is the One who has invited us in, whose grace is our entry to living in relationship with God now and always, in spite of our doubting laughter or our joyful laughter, our faltering faithfulness.

Sarah & Abraham became the parents of a great nation – of Israel and the other Abrahamic faith traditions as well – of Christianity and Islam – where we all have our own unique perspectives and developmental maturity – however, we are siblings, intended to live in harmony and share in God’s dream of Shalom for all people. Abraham isn’t primarily the patriarch of Israel, rather he is the model and mentor of all who believe, whether they belong to Israel or not.

You might have noticed that Carolyn’s story didn’t mention circumcision as part of the Covenant - Why ----- most commentators can’t explain its absence – however it is partnered with the Covenant stories by being linked to Romans 4 today,

Paul tells new converts that circumcision is not necessary – the Covenant was the thing -- in Romans 2: 29 – Paul says the opening of our hearts towards relationship with God is the real deal, or as some put it, being born again.

What inaugurates and sustains their wholeness is a relationship based on faith – a faith which entails some cognitive belief and a commitment to faithfulness in an ongoing relationship that includes becoming involved in the life and work of God in the world, - not abstractly, but in a way of being – the way we live our lives.

God can elevate Gentiles to become the people of God – when they discover they have faith – God can love the seemingly unlovable and love them back to life.

Jesus in Mark says: if you want to save your life, lose it, sacrifice it, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.,

The disciples were in Caesarea Phillippi – where Jesus is teaching – on their journey to Jerusalem – at a pagan site associated with the worship of the Emperor of Rome –
That is, they were at the temple which Herod the Great had built to honor Caesar Augustus

Peter wasn't having any of this Son of Man stuff ---you heard Peter ---- “that positively freaks me out! Stop talking so loudly. People will hear you”. Jesus can see that Peter is still assuming the normal expectations associated with messiahship, having visions of Jesus being the sort of messiah who would sweep in and being about the promised Golden Age – be like King David and destroy Israel's enemies and bring peace and prosperity to the land.

This conversation is about making a commitment to the Son of Man

We mustn't be too hard on Peter – it's natural to wish to preserve those we love from suffering – even if we acknowledge some measure of suffering to be an unavoidable byproduct of what for them and for ourselves leads to fuller life. The fact that a disciple, Peter, who has just got something so splendidly right – (you are the Messiah) straightway stumbles so badly at the thought of suffering can be an encouragement, a recognition in the gospels that we all do badly at suffering.'

If you follow Jesus, you can expect to be crucified – that's what first century readers saw in the phrase 'take up your Cross – a condemned person carrying their cross for their own crucifixion. – what a chilling prospect – As Ched Myers says: this is the central paradox of the Gospel – the threat to punish by death is the bottom line of the power of the state; fear of this threat keeps the dominant order intact. By resisting this fear and pursuing kingdom practice even at the cost of death, the disciple contributes to shattering the power's reign of death in history.

We in UCA – we are a pilgrim people Always on the way towards a promised goal – although sometimes we seem to need a few pit stops before we get on THE WAY AGAIN.
We are always being challenged to want something different FROM the status quo – instead of thinking of ourselves and believing that it is to our good to gain wealth and avoid any path which leads to suffering, we are being challenged to be generous, giving of ourselves, even when it may mean suffering – to embrace self-giving love – and not to renege on all that Jesus stands for when faced with pressure, or even persecution.

For us, it may mean damping down a voice of the Holy Spirit which is trying to be manifest in compassion and generosity of being. – in Abraham's case it was about whether his aged wife could become pregnant. IN the case of the gentiles, it is about whether people who are not part of Israel can be elevated to become God's people.

And, in this period of Lent, - it is whether Jesus can be raised to life and that gracious gift of faith is the belief that God can do the seemingly impossible. Amen.