

Lent 2B 2015

St. Andrews, Marblehead

Mark 8:31-38

Genesis 17

Roman 4: 13-25

In our lesson from Genesis, we are witness to a continuing story. That story has a history of more than twenty years of God and Abraham in relationship. A relationship which will continue for many years to come after the events of today's lesson. But this renaming that we witness today is an important moment. God has already promised Abraham that he and Sarah will be the ancestors to a great race of people. The renaming is a further piece of the intimate relationship that Abraham has forged with God...and God with Abraham. The epistle of James even says that "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness', and he was called the friend of God." It is this notion of relationship that the apostle Paul takes on in his letter to the Romans.

In what can be a very confusing lesson without understanding the context of his argument, Paul makes a case that Abraham's righteousness was based not upon any right observation of the Law, in fact the Law didn't even exist at this point in time, so Abraham's righteousness couldn't have been based on how well he obeyed the law. It was based on a relationship. In Biblical language, Abraham believed God and that faith was counted to him as righteousness. Abraham was justified, not by carefully observing some rule, but simply because he believed God...or to be more specific, because he *trusted* God. As a brief aside, it is exactly this idea that energized Martin Luther as he was translating the book of Romans which led him to his clarion call, "sola fide", "faith alone", and eventually led to that little blip in history that we know as the Reformation.

So Paul has pretty much committed treason with regard to the Jewish Law. He is arguing that a right relationship with God is not based on some observance but on trust. Not based on sacrifice, but on God's desire to be in relationship with God's creation. And Paul makes this argument noting that the trusting relationship predated the Law. In fact, Paul's argument in Romans hinges on this point. The Law can only bring judgment. You obey it, and you're right with God, or you don't, and you're condemned. Jesus comes in a corrective sort of way to point to that earlier covenant with Abraham that stressed relationship.

This is the mission of Jesus: to proclaim release to the captives and sight to the blind, to bind up the broken hearted and proclaim a Jubilee of God. Those who are bound and condemned by the Law are relieved of their burden. Those blinded by the condemning nature of the Law are given sight to a pathway that leads to God. And jubilee in the scriptures is a season of forgiveness. It is this mission that leads Jesus to a hill outside of Jerusalem to die on an instrument of torture.

Now, did Jesus have to be some kind of prophet to predict that the scribes, elders and priests would disapprove of him and want to kill him? I don't think so. He knew exactly what he was up to and how it would be received by those who held the keys to the kingdom prior to his snatching them away from them and breaking open a new way, or perhaps more accurately, repaving an old path to his heavenly Father. As with any power who controls a resource, be that grace or oil, food or cheap labor, people in power who control that resource will do what they can to maintain control of that resource.

Jesus' prediction of death was a logical conclusion to the life that he led. In his denial of Peter, he was giving notice that his intention was to live the consequences of that life of proclaiming the Kingdom to its end. Even though there were people who had a vested interest in making sure that he was silenced.

When he talks about taking up the cross, I think that this is a call to any who would follow. There will be powerful people who will confront you. Jesus, John the Baptist, the disciples: All of them had an intimate connection to God but that did not save them from powers who ruled their world. With uncharacteristic clarity, Jesus tells us that faith is no cake walk. Standing up for justice and human dignity, insisting that everyone has equal access and equal rights to God does not automatically pave a way where everyone says, "Oh, of course, guaranteeing human dignity is the right way to go." Because when you start to live into this way of being that is the Kingdom of God, it means that in order to ensure a place at the table for everyone, some may have to squeeze a bit, change a little, make room. And for some, that just won't do.

To take up your cross and follow Christ is to understand that your cross may not be a physical burden or the burden of dealing with the unfairness of the world, but rather the result of choosing a way of living that puts your values at odds with others. That in itself may be a witness in the spirit of Jesus' own sacrifice. Are you willing to go there? Will you take up your cross and go where Christ went for the sake of a dream of a world where every human is valued, where the creation is treated with awe? Will you by word and deed proclaim the Good News of God in Christ? I will, with God's help. Amen.