

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-17 (Tanakh)

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am El Shaddai. Walk in My ways and be blameless. I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will make you exceedingly numerous."

Abram threw himself on his face; and God spoke to him further, "As for Me, this is My covenant with you: You shall be the father of a multitude of nations. And you shall no longer be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I make you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fertile, and make nations of you; and kings shall come forth from you. I will maintain My covenant between Me and you, and your offspring to come, as an everlasting covenant throughout the ages, to be God to you and to your offspring to come.

And God said to Abraham, "As for your wife Sarai, you shall not call her Sarai, but her name shall be Sarah. I will bless her; indeed, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she shall give rise to nations; rulers of peoples shall issue from her." Abraham threw himself on his face and laughed, as he said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man a hundred years old, or can Sarah bear a child at ninety?"

## What Kind of Promise Is This?

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: March 1, 2015 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-17

Abram and Sarai have little reason to put much stock in God's promises. From the beginning the whole project was dubious. Back in chapter 12, almost 25 years ago, when Abram was already 75, God told Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation." From the beginning a promise such as this to a couple of such advanced age was unrealistic. Now it is 24 years later. Time has marched on for the aging couple. The biological clock has kept ticking; one might think it has stopped running. Abram and Sarai are beyond any age to possibly bear children.

So, Abram is surely startled when he hears the voice of God once more, "I am El Shaddai. Walk in My ways and be blameless. I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will make you exceedingly numerous."

Saturday Night Live would have a ball with this conversation between God and Abram. Can't you just see Eddie Murphy playing Abram? You ask me to walk in your ways be blameless. Well, let me tell you, El Shaddai, I've been walking, for a quarter of a century I've been walking, walking back and forth over every mountain and desert from the Tigris to the Nile, from Haran to Egypt. O let me tell you, El Shaddai, I've been walking the walk. And now I'm ninety-nine years old. I'm getting too old for this. I've been trying to believe that something will come out of nothing. But where have you been, El Shaddai?" You show up every decade or so with same old line, "I'll make you a great nation." Do you have any idea what the Canaanites say about me when they see me going by their villages? I'll tell you what they say. They say, "There go that old man and his wife again. They walk all over the place babbling that their God is going to make them a great nation." They feel bad for me, El Shaddai, because they think I'm a fool.

But God keeps on talking as if he hasn't heard a word from Eddie Murphy. He gives Abram and Sarah new names. And then God gets concrete. "I will give you and Sarah a natural born son." At this point the old man falls down on the ground laughing his head off. He howls, "Can a child be born to a man a hundred years old, or can Sarah bear a child at ninety?"

In the Saturday Night Live version I imagine the camera moving in close to Eddie Murphy, who suddenly grasps the implications, no longer laughing but instead scared to death. "No, God, you wouldn't do that would you? A baby at our age? Come on, you're God. You must have a better plan than that."

Well as if to emphasize the incredulity of the old couple, the Bible tells the story twice. In the second, more familiar version, it's Sarah who laughs in the tent at the news.

The Bible wants us to understand just how implausible the promises God makes to Abraham and Sarah are. They are beyond possibility.

I don't know about you, but I sympathize with Abraham and Sarah's feeling that God makes promises that seem preposterous.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Some days I think it might be more likely to have a newborn at a hundred years old than to see these beatitudes fulfilled.

Unarmed young men of color are killed in significant and disproportionate numbers by white police officers, and yet the shootings almost never end in indictments. This is not a rant against police officers, whose jobs are hard and dangerous, and many, if not most, of whom are judicious in their use of force. But what cannot be denied is that the disproportionate number of unarmed black men killed by white police officers combined with the absence of indictments, conveys the ugly truth that in our country black lives do not matter as much as white lives. There is little comfort for those who mourn, those to whom those young lives matter very much.

Gruesome videos of beheadings and other atrocities by groups like ISIS are released with alarming frequency. And who are the victims? In many cases, they are aid workers, teachers and reporters-non-combatants whose only sin is caring. Boko Haram abductors rampantly murder and rape young girls in Nigeria. The girls' crime, being born female and seeking an education. The day when the meek shall inherit the earth and the merciful shall receive mercy seems a very long way off in our world.

Is it not fair to say that the promises of God are a challenge for us? We would love to see a world that works like the beatitudes promise, but in many ways it seems naive to believe their rosy assurances. Are not the beatitudes as laughable as having a baby at a hundred?

How are we to find faith? On what basis are we to believe in God? In the face of the overwhelming contrary evidence, how are we to deal with the promises of our God?

Well, one way that works for many Christians is to say that while God's promises aren't true in this life, they will be in the next. In heaven, the afterlife, the next life the merciful will find mercy; the meek will inherit the earth; and there will be no mourning at all. It's not my favorite theory. I'm not questioning the afterlife. I am questioning whether God really means that this life is simply a rehearsal or proving ground for the next one. If we're meek and merciful now, we'll earn reward in heaven. Or we just need to be patient. This life may be difficult, even brutal, but the next life won't be.

In her first ministry not long after we graduated one of my Divinity School classmates had a lovely young woman in her congregation. Tragically a young man, also in the congregation, murdered the young woman. They said he was crazy. He said he killed her because he loved her so much. He loved her so much that he wanted her to be in heaven as soon as possible. He probably did suffer from mental illness, but he also made perfectly logical use of the idea that in death one escapes life's difficulties and goes on to eternal bliss.

Whatever the truth about the afterlife is, God never meant it to be pretext for murder. Neither did God ever mean it to be a prize reserved for those who believe the right things, or who act in a certain way, or who simply wait out the vagaries of this life. Believing God's promises is to believe that they are directed to and meant for this life, as well as the next. That's both the good news and the bad news. The bad news is that we're back where we started. How do we believe in God's promises, when they seem so far-fetched in this world in which we live? The good news is that believing in God's promises is to believe something about the here and now, something about this life, something about this existence.

The Christian existentialist philosopher Soren Kierkegaard said the Christian believer takes a leap of faith. He thought that on the surface of it, life was absurd. In the face of that absurdity the Christian made a leap of faith to believe. Sounds right. But, believe what? What exactly does the Christian believer make a leap to believe?

Much of philosophy and Christianity, at least over the last few hundred years, has settled for rather anemic ideas of belief and truth. Truth became something you could prove mathematically, like  $2 + 2 = 4$ . Or it was something you could measure. It is true that water freezes at 32 degree Fahrenheit because we can observe and measure the fact. You don't really need to believe these things because you can prove they are true.

So belief in a religious sense usually came to mean that you believed in the existence of something you couldn't prove, like God. If you believed it but couldn't prove it, you believed it on faith. Here's where it got a little crazy. Much religious faith came to mean that you believed a certain set of unprovable propositions. If you believe that God exists (though you can't see God or prove God's existence); if you believe that heaven exists (again even though you can't see it or prove it); and you believe that Jesus is you Lord and Savior (which, again, is hard to prove), then by some calculations your extraordinary faith will save you from a very bad eternity. It's a wager. You live here for a few decades; you live in eternity, well, forever. Commit to some speculative beliefs now betting that any sacrifices will be repaid many times in the forever. Notice that the important thing is to believe certain things to be facts, like God exists. That's what gets you into heaven.

But this modern idea of belief is quite limited when compared to what the Bible meant when it talked about belief. When Jesus said, "Believe in God; believe also in me," he meant more than believe that God exists. He meant put your full trust in God. When God told Abraham that he would become a people and that he would have a son, God was asking Abraham more than to believe an incredible story, though that was part of it. God was asking Abraham to put his life in the hands of God, to stake his life on trusting God.

The difference here may seem subtle and inconsequential, but it's really quite dramatic. To put one's full trust in God, to make that leap of faith that Kierkegaard talked about, is to believe in God's promises for this world without having the slightest ideas how they can be true. It has little to do with making a commitment to believe something implausible, a faith test, that makes you eligible for some reward. It means believing that we can entrust our lives to God even in the face of what seems an impossibly broken world. It means that in an unjust and broken world we take the leap of faith to believe that our job is live in the light of the beatitudes and the rest of the Sermon on the Mount: living peacefully, mercifully, lovingly and compassionately. We stake our lives on two

things. The first is that this is what God calls us to do, and our job is to be obediently faithful, to live in these ways without being able to see what difference, if any, it makes. The second is the belief that in ways that are mostly beyond our grasp, God will be faithful to God's promises.

Like Abraham we may traverse mountain and desert without seeing results. We may be befuddled by promises that seem utterly impossible. As we journey we may have many ideas of what we want in return for our obedience to God, we will watch those hopes and expectations be frustrated day after day. And yet we continue putting one foot in front of another, doing the best we can to act faithfully, the best we can to believe in and stake our lives on God's promises. In the end, it is the only way I know to live in and love this broken world of ours. May we hear the ancient admonition: "I am El Shaddai. Walk in My ways and be blameless." Amen.