

# Second Sunday in Lent

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. 2And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." 3Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, 4"As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. 5No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. 6I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. 7I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. 15God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. 16I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

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## DIAGNOSIS: Taking Matters into One's Own Hands

**Step One: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** : *Promises, Promises*

The Lord appeared to Abram. Abram fell on his face. The Lord said, "You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations." Abram has heard this before. For a quarter of a century God has made this promise to Abram. Yet his wife Sarai remained childless. God first made the promise when Abram was seventy-five. He is now ninety-nine. Sarai is ninety. Despite God's promises Abram and Sarai had already taken matters into their own hands. Sarai gave her maid to Abram. Hagar bore Ishmael.

Abram had a child of his own issue. God's promise of making him the ancestor of a multitude of nations had a chance of coming true with a little human intervention.

### **Step Two: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Falling Down Laughing***

Falling on one's face is what one does before God. It is an act of worship. We acknowledge our unworthiness. However, Abraham fell on his face laughing when God told him, "I will give you a son by Sarah" (17:17). Abram laughed in God's face before Sarah chuckled to herself while hiding behind the tent flap (18:12). Abraham did not believe God could keep the promises made. Abraham believed old age was stronger than God.

### **Step Three: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Cut Off***

In Chapter 17 God changed Abram's name to Abraham and Sarai's name to Sarah. The difference in the meaning of the names is minimal in Abraham's case and indiscernible in Sarah's. The point is by naming them God lays claim to them. They belong to God and God to them by the covenant God established with them beginning in Genesis 12.

In Chapter 17 God also introduced circumcision as a sign of the covenant. In 17:14 God warned, "Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant." Circumcision is an outward sign but was meant to cut more deeply than the foreskin. For example, God says in Jeremiah 4:4, "Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, remove the foreskin of your hearts, or else my wrath will go forth like fire and burn with no one to quench it."

Abraham submitted to the circumcision of his foreskin and commanded the same for all the male members of his household, including thirteen-year-old Ishmael. Abraham's flesh may be circumcised but his heart is not. He has hung his heart on the

plans Sarah and he carried out and the son born to Hagar and to him. For taking matters into his own hands Abraham faces the ultimate cut.

## **PROGNOSIS: God Takes Matters in Hand**

### **Step Four: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *God's Promises Cut Deeper***

Laughing in God's face calls for retribution. That is how things work. God, however, is unfazed. God named the yet-to-be-born son of Abraham and Sarah. God named him Isaac. God named him Laughter. God promised blessings for Isaac and Ishmael. Abraham will be the father of a multitude of nations through both sons. However, it is through Isaac, the son of the promise, that God will fulfill the pledge to Abraham that all the nations of the world will be blessed.

God did not react to Abraham's laughter the way the old order has taught us to expect. God's reaction to Abraham leads us to expect something new from Isaac's heir, Jesus. This Son of the Promise endured laughter and mockery far greater than what Abraham dished out. He endured the power of the empire without the fear and deceit in which Abraham engaged with his wife.

Jesus' friends denied and deserted him. All the violence of which we old-order citizens are capable we unleashed on Jesus at the cross. From the cross Jesus offered forgiveness. When God raised him from the grave Jesus did not seek to get even with his would-be his enemies. He rather called them to follow him into a new creation governed not by keeping score and getting even but by mercy and forgiveness. He called them to follow him from the old order bordered by death into a new realm with no such boundaries.

### **Step Five: Advances Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Falling Down Laughing***

Jesus demonstrated God was not only more powerful than old age but more powerful than death. God's promises were fulfilled in Jesus. Because of that we extend to God the credit (think credo and creed) that is faith in the God who will also raise us to new life. Once Jesus' followers got over their doubt, amazement, and fear they must have laughed. I picture them falling down laughing at the sight of their risen Lord in their midst. It was a laughter of joy that sprang from the depths of their hearts and souls. Jesus was stronger than empire, violence, and death itself. He was the one worthy of their faith and their following.

When we gather for funerals falling down laughing is not a part of the liturgy. However, there is something comical about putting a cross at the head of the procession. The joke is on death. By this instrument of death Jesus overcame death. By putting a cross at the head of the procession we thumb our noses at death. Maybe we should put that in the liturgy.

After the funeral service's Lord's Supper we often extend the fellowship by gathering around tables to eat together. In that setting we tell stories about the one who has died. Great laughter accompanies these stories. This laughter is only possible because of our faith in Christ who has died, risen, and will come again.

**Step Six: Final Prognosis (External Solution) :** *Promises We Keep*  
The prophet Micah lays out in few words the promises God calls us to keep: Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

Through the body and blood of Christ God makes a new covenant with us. The outward sign of the new covenant is baptism. In baptism we die with Christ and rise with him to new life. Baptism initiates us into a daily rhythm of life marked by confession and forgiveness. By confession and forgiveness we

return to the font.

Parents and sponsors make promises when they bring children for baptism. They promises to “bring them to the services of God’s house, teach them the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments, and provide for their instruction in the Christian faith that living in the covenant of their baptism they may lead godly lives until the day of Jesus Christ.”

When we affirm our baptism we say we intend to continue in the covenant God made with us in Holy Baptism by living among God’s faithful people, hearing his Word and sharing in his supper, proclaiming the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, serving all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus, and by striving for justice and peace in all the earth.

As we so live, hear, proclaim, serve, and strive we do more than keep the promises we made to God. We also are the means God uses to keep the promises God has made to the world.