**Preaching Notes Lent 2.B.2015**

**Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16**

God made many promises made to Abraham and Sarah and their offspring. Each promise came with a corresponding responsibility attached to it that may or may not have been easy to live out as God’s people. The ongoing struggle faced by people of faith, both ancient and present day, is to consider how we are doing in the living out of our covenants, be they with God, with our neighbors, or with ourselves. Because while God may be perfectly faithful to the terms God has established, we, God’s partners in the covenant, are not able to be perfectly faithful. We try, but try as we may, we are not able to succeed.

The season of Lent is a call to an annual reflection on the covenant we have made with God, with one another, and with ourselves. It is a time set aside by the Church to seriously consider how we are living out the terms of our agreement. It is an invitation to take a deep and serious inventory of our lives and, if need be, make some adjustments.

The covenant we make as United Methodists is rooted in our baptismal vows. Like the covenant made between God and Abraham, Sarah, and their offspring, the promises come with responsibilities attached. What is that covenant?

God’s promise to us made through the Covenant of Baptism is rooted in God’s gift of grace. We love God and one another because God first loved us (1 John 4:10-11). Through the baptismal covenant we are marked for perpetuity by water and the Spirit as children of God. Our names may not be changed, but our lives are. As covenant people we each have a responsibility to live as followers of Jesus Christ every day and in every way possible. Our response to God’s gift of grace is to live as disciples. Discipleship is our part in the keeping of the covenant.

According to the *Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2012* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), paragraph 217, page 153) disciples in the United Methodist tradition make a covenant to do the following:

1. To renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of the world, and repent of their sin;

2. To accept the freedom and power God gives them to resist evil, injustice, and oppression;

3. To confess Jesus Christ as Savior, put their whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as their Lord;

4. To remain faithful members of Christ’s holy church and serve as Christ’s representatives in the world;

5. To be loyal to Christ through The United Methodist Church and do all in their power to strengthen its ministries;

6. To faithfully participate in its ministries by their prayers, their presence, their gifts, their service, and their witness;

7. To receive and profess the Christian faith as contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

As you consider the gift of grace that God has offered you through your baptismal and continue during this season to reflect on your own response of discipleship, it might be helpful to not only keep the promises before you, but to talk with others about how you are living them out together as a community of faith.

**Romans 4:13-25**

Thank goodness for Paul’s clarification about the difference between covenant as law and covenant as trust because without it we would all surely be doomed.

* Yes, as noted above, we have responsibilities with regard to the covenant we have made with God.
* And yes, God is faithful even when we are not.

But according to Paul, our responsibility in the covenant is rooted not in a fear of punishment under the law for our failure to live up to our promises, but rather in our trust in God’s promise of grace.

Our first job is to put our trust wholly, as did Abraham and Sarah, in the one who has offered us the gift of grace. And maybe that is the hardest thing to do—harder even than living as disciples.

* Do we really trust that God’s grace is a gift freely given to us?
* Can we truly believe that we don’t have to do something to earn God’s love?
* Are we not inclined to default to a position of works righteousness and begin to imagine that God can’t love us simply for who we are, but only for what we have done?
* What needs to happen in order for us, like Abraham, to be fully convinced that God will do what God has promised no matter what our response?

Keeping our part of the covenant is important, but God’s grace and mercy towards us is unlimited and unending. This means that even when we fail to keep up our end of the bargain, God’s love for us will never fail. This is the good news that enables us to go on even after we have sinned, even after we have fallen away, even after we have “done those things we ought not to have done.”

God’s promise is to love us. Period. There is nothing we can ever do to lose that love.

Remember how Paul puts it only a few chapters later?

“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39 NRSV).

So even as we are called to reflect upon how we are living out the covenant, this reflection is always to be done in a spirit of trust, assurance, and faith, and never out of fear of divine retribution.

The trick here is to help your people hear the call to accountability without letting go of the root of the covenant, which is God’s promise of grace offered in baptism. Navigate these waters carefully, my friends. Never lose sight that the call to reflect upon the covenant is first and foremost a call to remember our baptism and be thankful!

**Mark 8:31-38**

In most United Methodist churches there are people in the congregation who have been part of the community for a long time, perhaps their entire lives. Longstanding members have faced the challenges that life inevitably brings within the context of the community of faith:

* Loved ones getting sick or hurt
* Being diagnosed with life-threatening illnesses or other
* Loss of security, or significant relationships
* Loss of a certain identity that comes with having a career, or a stable income.
* Loss of beloved church members
* Loss of pastors who have left over the years

Those periods in life in which people must summon the faith and courage to confront the inevitable matter of change, and loss, and even face their own mortality, are difficult and painful. Perhaps the best time of the year to find comfort and wisdom in the worship patterns and scripture lessons of the Christian year is during the season of Lent.

Why do I say that? Because during Lent we are invited to walk alongside our Lord Jesus as he endures the most difficult chapter of his earthly life. Through the annual Lenten pattern of recalling the story of his final days on earth we are all given an opportunity to reflect on how his example helps us all to face the inevitable challenges life brings with courage and hope. Jesus was after all, the one who provided the greatest example humans have ever known of what it means to be courageous in the face of a death, to hold on to hope, to find strength in God, and to make the ultimate sacrifice for the sake of others.

Jesus was courageous and hopeful about humanity. He was courageous and hopeful about *living* and about *dying.* Even in the face of death, in his final moments on a cross in a place called Golgotha, with his lifeblood running down from the thorns and nails and spear in his side, he was able to reach out to human beings forever, speaking on our behalf at the end of his life, with the unforgettable words, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”

* How is it that Jesus was able to continue being hopeful in the face of his own death?
* How was he able to live with so much courage and face death with such faith?
* How are *we* able to continue to be hopeful in the face of crisis and loss and finally, our inevitable death?

The answers to these questions are the keys to the Christian faith. They are at the heart of what it means to be a follower of Christ. They are what is meant when we use the words born again. And they are intrinsic to what it means, in this passage from Mark, to take up the cross.

This scene takes place around the villages of Caesarea Philippi. The Gospel writer Mark paints it as a crossroad point in Jesus' ministry in that it marks the beginning of a change in the focus of Jesus' message from his public ministry in Galilee, where he has been trying to demonstrate that he is the messiah, to (after Peter's affirmation of him) what it means for Jesus to be Christ and for his followers to be Christians.

Jesus gets the conversation going by asking his disciples what everybody is saying about him. At first the disciples answer him in terms of popular beliefs. They tell him some are comparing him to John the Baptist, or maybe Elijah, or some other prophet.

So then Jesus says, "But what about you guys. You know me by now. What do *you* think? What are *you* saying about me? Who do *you* tell people that I am?" And Peter, the one who was always looking for proof, the one who was always trying to find a way to know for sure, comes to a crossroad point in his own faith journey. It is he who speaks for all of them as if he's finally getting it for the first time and finally truly believing that Jesus is of God, when he blurts out, "You are the Messiah."

It is on the heels, then, of Peter's declaration about Jesus' identity that Jesus begins to teach them what it means to believe this and what it means to follow him. Jesus starts by explaining what kind of Messiah he is. He tells him that he not going to be the popular hero. He is not going the lead their country to worldly power or military success. And he is not going to give them what they think they need to be happy.

Jesus says to them,

You think that the way to be happy is to win the approval of people. But the way to true happiness, the way to self-fulfillment, is not through self-gratification.

The way to happiness is the way of the cross.

The way to fulfillment is not by gaining security for yourself, but by gaining security for your neighbors. I will suffer and be rejected by the world, and if you want to follow me, you've got to do the same.

Listen really closely to what I am saying to you:

* You've got to quit thinking about what will make you happy and start thinking about how you can give yourselves to other people.
* You've got to get your self out the way as the center of your life and the center of your love.
* You've got to deny yourself, take up your own cross and follow me.
* If you truly believe that I am the Messiah, then make following me the center of your life.
* If you want to be my follower then make loving me the focus of your life, because, if you keep focusing on yourself and measuring your success by worldly definitions, you might get the approval of people, but you will lose your soul in the process.

During this season of Lent, as we consider Jesus’ call to deny ourselves, take up our crosses and follow him, what changes do we need to make in order to succeed? What self-centered motivations do we need to release or push off to the side in order to see more clearly the path that is stretched out before us? How can we work towards the security of others who live in our communities? Who among us is the most vulnerable, the most at risk? What does it mean to lose our lives the sake of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ? What steps can we take to move in that direction? How can it give us courage for both living and dying?