

Second Sunday of Lent – Ali Lund

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:23-31; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

[Due to a weather cancellation, this sermon was prepared for March 1, 2015, but not preached.]

We know how the story ends. We grew up knowing. We have never gone through the Season of Lent unsure of what is going to happen next. To us, Lent is easy. Holy Week is easy. Because we know. We never doubt for a second that Easter *will* come. But, the disciples didn't know. Peter didn't know. So can you really blame him for his response to Jesus in today's gospel reading? I wonder if we might find more similarities between us and the unbelieving disciple than we would like to think. And so, as we look closely at these texts today, I would like to challenge you, church, to place yourself into this perspective, the perspective of Peter—the perspective of not knowing the end of the story.

Today is the Second Sunday of Lent, but what does that mean? Craig Kocher, Associate Dean of the Chapel and Director of Religious Life at Duke University, puts it this way: “The second week of Lent is not only a slow week, it is a hard week. The journey to the cross has just begun, the drama of Holy Week is a long way off, and the glory of Easter morning is not even a shadow in the distance. During Lent, the church in its wisdom calls us to reflect on our sin and brokenness, on all the ways we have fallen short of the high calling of following Jesus. Repentance is a painful process. Lenten self-reflection can be a dizzying undertaking and, when done well, frequently sends us reeling with the hurts, public and secret, that disfigure our lives and with all we have done, and left undone that has led to the undoing of the kingdom.” So basically, this is a pretty intense time of the Christian year.

Lent can be difficult. It is uncomfortable to reflect on our own sin, especially in a corporate setting. It can be awkward and even a little depressing. There are so many stories in scripture that highlight the great men and women of the Bible, living in obedience, walking in faith. We look to these stories to be encouraged and inspired. But today is different. Today we must reflect on our brokenness. And so I have chosen to look at the faithlessness of two great men of the Bible because it is through their lack of faith that I see myself so clearly, and see God's grace so radically.

Our Old Testament reading reminds us of a universal promise made to a very faithless generation. God has chosen a people who are constantly turning away from Him. Our reading today tells the story of a divine appointment between Abram and God Almighty, when God initiates faithfulness through a covenant with Abram. Not only does He give Abram the new name of Abraham, but with that name comes a promise, a covenant that is initiated, confirmed, and established by God. Abraham is to be the father of many nations. What has Abraham done to deserve this? The answer is: nothing. In fact, this promise is made right after Abraham's horrendous act of faithlessness. In chapter 16, Abraham chooses not to believe God's word. After the promise of a son, he sleeps with Hagar, who gives birth to Ishmael. What an act of unbelief! Abraham responds to the promise of God by saying, “Thanks God, but let me help you out because I'm not so sure you can do this on your own.” But this act of disbelief does not break the covenant of our faithful God. His promises are not dependent upon our faithfulness. He is not confined to our obedience. Instead, He INITIATES faithfulness in our lives even after

our own faithless actions. And he displays this so beautifully towards Abraham. This is a divine act. It goes against our cultural norm; quite frankly, it doesn't make sense to us. But this is the pattern of our God. His covenant cannot be broken, whether we are faithful or not. But the pattern is not over. We read in Romans 4 that after God made this promise to Abraham, something changed. Abraham not only received a new name, he received a new faith. In our reading from Genesis, we see that God's promise comes with a request. In verse 1, God tells Abraham, *Walk before me and be blameless*, and in verse 9, *As for you, you must keep my covenant and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come*. God's request is faith followed by obedience. But He does not make this request, expecting Abraham to come through on his own. Rather, God is the one who makes this faithfulness possible. He enables Abraham to trust in Him.

This is what I have learned from the story. There is a difference between believing in God and believing God. Abraham is enabled to **believe** God—to trust Him. God gives Abraham the faith to trust that He has the power to do what He says He can do. Only God can create this faith. Abraham did not create it, the church does not create it. God creates it, we cultivate it. Abraham did not receive the promise through the law. It was not through his own works. He really doesn't get any credit at all. He received the promise through a faith created and made possible by God.

I would like to back track just a bit in our Romans passage to verse 7, because if we are going to be reflecting on our sin today this verse is crucially important. *Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him*. Keep this in mind. During the season of Lent we find hope in this: God is not counting our sins against us. He is only counting our opportunities to believe Him, giving us the faith to do so, and in return receiving all glory.

So let's review this pattern. In the midst of our faithlessness, God initiates faithfulness, and then enables us to respond by living in faithfulness followed by obedience. I believe this pattern is found once again in our gospel reading. So now let's talk about Peter.

Peter seems to be the disciple that gets picked on the most, but I think that he is the one I can best relate to. Keep in mind that in the very verse before our gospel reading for today, Peter proclaims Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ. His intentions are good. I think that's the case with Abraham too. Neither of these men had bad intentions...they just didn't get it. They didn't understand. As soon as Jesus explains to Peter all the things that are about to happen, that he is to suffer, be rejected, eventually be killed, and rise again, Peter can't handle it. Jesus speaks so plainly to Peter, telling him exactly what to expect, and in response Peter rebukes Him—rebukes the One he has just called the Messiah!...because he can't believe it. Peter is incapable of faithfulness. He is unable to believe that God has the power to do what He says He can do.

I grew up in the Lutheran church and this is the part of the sermon where the Lutheran in me really comes out. A lot of you probably knew this was coming. But I have to talk about Martin Luther at some point in my sermon. One of the things that Luther taught was the contrast between "theology of glory" and "theology of the cross." Theology of glory assumes how a god should act and how we would expect one to be according to our human understanding. It

confirms what people want a god to be based on their own ideas. But theology of the cross contradicts this. It goes against everything that humans would think or imagine God as. It is God revealing Himself to us in weakness. It is God suffering and dying. And I think this is Peter's issue. He is so focused on theology of glory that he can't possibly accept another way. The truth of Who God is contradicts Peter's own ideas of divinity. Dr. Zahniser reminded us, a few weeks ago, that "human thinking is not divine thinking." Peter was not able to understand why the man he had just claimed as the Messiah was going to have to die such a brutal and grotesque death, because he was thinking on human terms. But, once again, God is not confined to our human ideas of what a god should be. Peter's (and our own) faithlessness does not stop or affect God's faithfulness in any way. Right after Peter responds to Jesus with disbelief, Jesus dies anyway. Jesus saves anyway. That is the gospel. Our faithlessness is followed by Christ's initiating faithfulness. Do you see the pattern? But just like the story of Abraham, it does not end here. Once again, there is a response. And this response, once again, is faithfulness. It is found in Mark 8, verses 34 and 35. *If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.* This is the act of faithfulness that we are called to. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer boldly states in his book, The Cost of Discipleship, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." But we are not alone. Christ gives us the faith to act in obedience. Peter is a great example of this. Christian tradition teaches us that Peter did in fact follow Christ to death and was eventually crucified. A man who did not have the faith to believe Jesus could do what He said He could do, is given the faith to obey this command, even to share in the same death that Christ faced. What a radical change in Peter's heart, one that only God could enable!

So now that I have talked about Abraham and Peter, I thought it would be appropriate to share a story in my own life that reflects this pattern. This was not hard to come up with. Stories of me lacking faith started flooding my mind and I think the hardest part was picking one. This is something that I struggle with. My most recent struggle has been trusting God with my future. As a senior, I am truly terrified of leaving Greenville and beginning a new chapter in my life. I look into a future of "not knowing" and I feel just like the disciples during Lent. The unknown overwhelms me, and I don't understand how the Lord will be able to come through. As silly as that sounds coming out of my mouth, I can't deny that this is often how I feel. I'm reminded of the lyrics to a Chris Rice song that describe my frustration. In the song Eighth Grade he sings, "Why does that past always seem safer? Maybe because at least we know we made it. And why do we worry about the future, when every day will come just the way the Lord ordained it?" But even through my doubt, God has filled my days with small reminders of His constant faithfulness in my life. Bit by bit, He is piecing things together in a way that only He could accomplish. He is reassuring me of His past faithfulness, His present faithfulness, and even His future faithfulness in my life. And lately He has given me the faith to find rest in believing that He will come through.

Lent can easily become discouraging. I believe that as a church we can relate to Peter, but today I see this as a hopeful thing. If Peter struggles, that means we can, too. And if Peter can be a disciple, we can, too. So during this Lenten season, as we reflect on our sin and brokenness, let us be reminded of the constant and perfect faithfulness of our God—a faithfulness that is not dependent upon anything we do, but is always available to us through the saving grace of Christ.

And my prayer is that our response as a church is to cultivate the faithfulness that has been created in us, and to walk in obedience as children of the living God. Amen.