

## Unashamed – Ben Wayman

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

I was ten years old when I first felt ashamed. My dad, by virtue of his post at the Santa Barbara Free Methodist Church, was given a car; a 1973 Dodge Colt. It was bronze (with sparkles). Two of its more prominent features were a passenger door whose hinge strongly resisted any suggestion of being opened or shut, and a muffler that had an irresistible urge to emit a tick-tick-tick, Boom! EVERY time the car came to a stop. Needless to say, my comings and goings to places like school or soccer practice never surprised anyone.

What was shameful to me about the bronze bomber was not just that it was an eye and ear sore. Rather, the colt represented for me the strangeness of the Christian faith. Only my dad, pastor Denny, had a job that offered such perks as cars that could not be traded in. And it was only this faith, it seemed to me, that consistently disregarded the cultural norms of Santa Barbarans. He was a pastor and we were Christians. The Dodge Colt made it clear; Christians are odd, and I was ashamed about it.

I'd like to talk today about God's love and our shame. I'd like to do this by addressing God's promises, a central theme that appears in today's readings. After we have considered the kind of promises that God seems to be in the business of making, I would like to consider how God's love is more powerful than our shame.

Shame, Scripture tells us, is almost as old as humanity. In the second chapter of Genesis we learn that Adam and Eve "were both naked, and were not ashamed." But shame makes its entrance into the human story in the very next chapter, at the very moment that Adam and Eve turned from God. As soon as Adam and Eve set themselves against God they began to look at their nakedness as something to be ashamed of. Until then, it was just the way things were.

Since that day, God's actions in the world have appeared strange to us. It should not come as a surprise, then, that this strangeness did not begin with Christ, but can be traced back to God's engagement with Israel. As Christians, we affirm that the same God we encounter in Jesus was also a friend to Adam, Noah and Abraham.

In our Old Testament reading last week we encountered Noah, the man who made an enormous boat in the desert at God's behest. God promised Noah that floods would never again destroy the earth. Today we meet Abraham and Sarah. Or should I say, Abram and Sarai. When the couple is first mentioned in Genesis, they are in a different place, the land of Haran, a town of trade and devotion to an Assyrian moon god. At that point in the story, the Lord promised the 75-year-old Abraham that he would make of him a great nation, bless him, and

make him a blessing to all the families of the earth. Not an ordinary promise, clearly. In our reading today, God reminds the 99-year-old Abraham of this promise for the third time. Apparently, Abraham's patience was beginning to wear thin, and God was aware of it.

Two things strike me as odd about this promise. First, this promise is wildly open-ended. Bless all the families of the earth? I can imagine Abraham thinking to himself: "This is very generous of you, God, but can we clarify the details of this blessing? Perhaps I might get this in writing?" How could Abraham possibly hold God accountable to this massive promise?

The second oddity about God's promise is that it is unnecessarily unreasonable. Why would God promise to make a great nation of a couple who cannot have children? This issue comes to a head in our reading today when 25 years have passed and Abraham and Sarah still have not conceived. We know this is a touchy issue for Abraham and Sarah because 12 years before this point in the story, Abraham and Sarah took matters into their own hands and Abraham impregnated Hagar, Sarah's slave-girl. This, for Abraham and Sarah, was a much more reasonable solution to the sticky promise God had gotten himself into.

One way of reading Abraham's affair with Hagar is that he was embarrassed by God's promise. He was both embarrassed that God seemingly had made a promise he could not keep and he was embarrassed that God would make such a strange promise in the first place. "Come on, God, let's be a bit more realistic. Let's not make things more difficult than they need to be." Which is another way of saying, "If I'm going to be seen with you, God, you'll need to behave a bit more normal."

You know this kind of conversation. It's the kind of conversation teenagers have with their parents before being seen with them in public. So one way of interpreting Abraham's troubleshooting around God's strange promise is that Abraham was ashamed of God. You might have noticed that our Old Testament reading stopped short of a crucial detail in the Abraham and Sarah story. If we read one verse further, we learn that right after God assures Abraham of his promise that Sarah will conceive, Abraham laughs at God. "Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" My wife would call this nervous laughter. God, apparently, is sticking to his promise, and Abraham is embarrassed.

So what we learn about God's promise-making ways is that God makes open-ended, unbelievable promises to his friends. What's embarrassing and uncomfortable about this is that we have no control over God and his strange promises. Despite however odd, however unrealistic God's promises seem to be, we are not in a position to help God keep his promises or make God be more normal.

In our Gospel reading today we learn just how strange and unbelievable God's actions in the world really are. One of the central themes of Mark's Gospel concerns the identity of Jesus: Who Do YOU Say that I am? While Mark tells his readers at the beginning of the Gospel that

Jesus is the Son of God, this is anything but clear to the characters in his story. In Mark's story, Jesus seems to appear out of nowhere. He's baptized by John and immediately begins acting and speaking with authority. In fact, Jesus' actions and teachings are so powerful that he created such a buzz among the poor in Palestine that he couldn't go into towns openly, but had to stay out in the country. Could this be God's promised Messiah?

Today's Gospel reading is the hinge of Mark's Gospel. Immediately before this passage Peter rightly identifies Jesus as the Messiah. And that's when everything starts to go weird for Peter and the disciples. It's not that Jesus hasn't shown any signs of strangeness before this point in the story – he's healed leprosy, blindness and paralysis. Strange, yes, but also really cool. Jesus has thumbed his nose at the pagan oppressors, skirted cultural convention, and called into question the religious elite – Again, really cool stuff.

But it's at this point in the story when Jesus' strangeness loses its enchantment with the disciples. It's at this point when Jesus, the promised Messiah who will put the Romans in their place, insists that he will suffer, be rejected and killed. "Now hold on a minute, Peter cries. This can't be the plan. This isn't how this is supposed to go. You're supposed to come galloping into Jerusalem on a white stallion and go gladiator on the Romans like King David on steroids. Let me help you out here, Jesus. You're not supposed to lose your life, you're supposed to save yourself and us by wiping out the Romans." This promise is just too incredible for Peter. How can you save anyone if you lose your life?

And this is when we, with Peter, feel a twinge of shame. But this twinge keeps getting stronger and stronger as we keep reading and walking with Jesus. Sure enough, Jesus comes plodding along into Jerusalem on a humble colt, not a military stallion. Jesus suffers at the hands of the Jewish elite as they spit on him and beat him. Jesus is rejected not only by the very people to whom God had made great promises, but by his closest friends. And Jesus is hung naked on a tree and killed in a standard Roman execution.

But Mark doesn't let up. In his cryptic fashion, Mark ends his Gospel with what feels like a punch in the gut. Mark tells us that when Mary Magdalene and her friends got to Jesus' tomb they were greeted by a young man who told them that Jesus had been raised. "Go and tell the disciples that Jesus has gone on to Galilee and he will meet you there." But Mark tells us that the women took off running from the tomb "for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." THE END.

Fortunately, the end of Mark's Gospel is not the end of the story. You are here this morning. While fear and shame strike us at times, we also realize that the seeming shame of the cross is our salvation. The good news is that God's love and wild promises are much bigger than your shame and fear. God is not ashamed to stretch out his arms of love on the hard wood of the cross so that everyone might come within the reach of his saving embrace.

You are here today because God is not ashamed to call you his friend. To be sure, God does not want you to be ashamed of him, but what really matters is that God is not ashamed of you. Lent is the time when we allow ourselves to have heart-to-heart, honest-to-God conversations. It is the time when we reacquaint ourselves with the God who makes incredible promises that require our conversion time and again. If God and his promises appear strange, then we must learn to live with them until we can see them as normal.

We are a people of hope who trust in outrageous promises. We believe impossible things – like creation, virgin birth, incarnation, resurrection, peace, and reconciliation. We're here this morning to proclaim and live a foolish faith, a faith that is shameful to the wisdom of the world and disregards cultural norms. In a moment we will all join our voices in reciting a creed that stretches our imagination and exhausts our reason. Christians, in all of our oddness, refuse to settle for what is possible or reasonable. Instead, we trust in the God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

Christians leave space for the surprising power of God because otherwise we are left only to ourselves. We observe Lent and Good Friday and Easter Sunday because we believe that there is something more than ourselves – more than the best of our wisdom and imagination. We believe in a God who makes promises and keeps them – no matter how impossible they may seem. We believe in the God who raised Jesus from the dead. And strange, though this may be, impossible though this may be, we are not ashamed to claim the good news that Jesus is Lord. Glory to God whose power, working in us, in spite of us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to him from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen.