

Yr. B, Lent 2
February 28, 2021
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1404 Words

Lessons: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16
Psalm 22:22-30
Romans 4:13-25
Mark 8:31-38

When Abram was ninety-nine years old...when it seemed as if it was far too late in life for anything fruitful to happen, the LORD appeared. When the family dynamics between Abram and his wife and his slave girl and his only son thickened into a terrible mess, the LORD appeared. We should be just as shocked by the unreasonableness of God as Abram was.

The story of the covenant between Almighty God and the highly esteemed Father of many nations begins with a glorious divine promise, followed by an inglorious, human reaction. According to our Holy Story, God promised a fruitful legacy. In response, Abram fell (flat) on his face.

“Get up, old man! Your life is *not* over. Your legacy is not complete.” Would God speak to Abram like that? Would God challenge you and me like that? I believe so. I believe God will do anything in order to bless fruitfulness.

So, which unreasonable promise—what impossible-sounding challenge—would be foolish enough to make you fall flat on your face? Be careful with your doubts, for this is the way of the LORD. In God’s time there is no such thing as too late...*or* too soon. The LORD of love delights in *unreasonableness*. “My thoughts are *not* your thoughts,” says the LORD, “nor are your ways my ways.”¹

Those of us who want to think of ourselves as willing, junior partners with God must be prepared for one really hard thing—change. We must be willing to change our minds, our hearts, and our ways for the sake of goodness and love. Did you notice that everyone in our Genesis story underwent a name change...*including God?*

Abram was changed to Abraham. Sarai was changed to Sarah. *Elohim*, the LORD, became known as *El Shaddai*, God Almighty. In biblical story, a change of name often represents a change of direction or purpose. When is the last time you willingly changed your mind about your direction or purpose?

Very few people are able to change 180 degrees, though some need to. A wise teacher once explained to me how even a modest change can make a big difference if we are willing to stick with it. A few degrees difference on a journey across the Atlantic can mean the difference between landing in Ireland or Africa.

How much are you willing to change for the glory of God? How much are you willing to change in order to become a fruitful blessing with God? The question of change—old as Father Abraham, and fresh as this morning’s breeze.

Perhaps you will remember from my sermon a couple of weeks ago that it was just six days before Jesus was *changed*—transfigured on the mountaintop—when he had *this conversation* with Peter and a large crowd of followers. The topic? Change.

Ten seconds earlier, Peter got it right about who God’s Messiah was—Jesus! But then, Peter got it wrong about who God’s Messiah was supposed to become. Like every other normal-thinking Galilean, Peter perceived God’s Messiah in the mold of powerful King David, vanquishing the enemy and establishing an everlasting kingdom for the glory of God. With the LORD on our side, we want to believe that might *does*...make right. Wrong!

¹ Isaiah 55:8

It does *not*, according to Jesus. Quite the opposite.

Jesus completely redefines who God's Messiah is supposed to be—one who suffers, one who is completely rejected by the most religious-acting people, one who is killed by the very enemy we want vanquished. Our minds are slammed shut after hearing these three unreasonable things.

Did Peter or anybody else in that crowd *even listen* to the last part, the promise Jesus made about rising again on the third day? I don't think so. It's obvious that Peter's reaction to God's promise was to fall flat on his face, like Abram had done. We should be just as shocked by the *unreasonableness* of God as Peter was.

During my high school years, my older sister's Pontiac Ventura was passed down to me when she left for college. It made sense. She went to Carolina and the Ventura was a conspicuous shade of orange, though not as harsh as some of you may imagine. Besides, in those days I was a Clemson fan—it was before I knew about the mighty Wofford Terriers.

Most days after school I would go hunting for a couple of hours, and this meant driving down a lot of different dirt roads on farms where I had permission to hunt. One of my favorite places to go was a railroad track not far from my house. Beside that railroad track was the softest, sandiest dirt road of all. The two ruts were so deep that I could feel the patch of weeds growing between them as they rustled underneath my car.

I realized once when no other cars were around that I could take my hands off the steering wheel for a few moments—going slowly, of course—and those deep ruts in the road would magically keep my orange Ventura going perfectly straight ahead.

In my warped, teen-aged brain I thought I was forty years ahead of automotive technology. In 1985 I proved to myself that *I* owned the first self-driving vehicle. One day I was showing my mom where I liked to hunt. I also decided to show her how cool it was to have a self-driving car. “Watch this,” I said. She was NOT impressed, even a tiny amount. “Put your hands on that steering wheel and don't ever take them off again!” What an idiot I was, falling flat on my face.

Sometimes, life can be like driving down a dirt road, letting the normal ruts lead us where we're going when we really need to get a grip. You know we will *never* be able to change, even a few degrees one way or the other, if we don't put our hands firmly on the steering wheel. We will never be *willing* to change our minds, our direction, or our purpose unless we are prepared for the inevitable—and sometimes surprising—twists and turns in the road.

Abram had a *good life* that seemed like it was almost over, but God had other ideas. Peter had a good idea about *who* God had anointed to lead his people, but God had *other ideas* about what Christ's leadership would look like. In both cases, God's ideas seemed *so unreasonable*. Abraham and Peter had to get a grip in order to change *with God*. We do too.

One of the purposes of Lent is to challenge us to look within our Sacred Stories and also our personal stories in order to listen to our own lives. Do they speak of fruitfulness with God for goodness' sake? Do they tell of the courage to change in ways that lead us to bless other people? Lent lets us look to see where our hearts may have drifted. Lent lets us look to see where our minds may be stuck in a rut. Lent is our season for getting a grip on the love of God, and trusting this love...*even* when it seems unreasonable.

Will there be suffering? Possibly. There *was* for God's beloved Son. Will there be rejection? Maybe. There *was* for God's beloved Son. Will we fall flat on our faces? Most likely. As it was for Abraham and Peter. Will there be the unreasonable promise of new life and a legacy of fruitfulness for the glory of God? Absolutely!

“As the heavens are higher than the earth,” says the LORD, “so are *my ways* higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

I would like to close by praying an adaptation of today’s opening collect in light of our sacred stories and our very-present needs:

O God, whose glory appears to us as a surprise...be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways, (however *unreasonable* your ways seem). And be gracious to all who are stuck in the rut of old assumptions. Grant us the courage to change our penitent hearts and minds. Grant us the strength to get back up whenever we fall flat on our faces. Grant us the determination to get a grip...and hold fast to the *unchangeable* truth of Jesus, your Son, and our Messiah, who invites us to trust the power, the blessing, and the fruitfulness of your Love.

Amen.