

Sermon: God's Doing it Wrong

Year B, Lent 2

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

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I mean, put yourself in Abram's shoes. He's married to Sarai, they're living in Ur with their families, their local gods, and life's ok. No kids, which is devastating, because to them that means no future, but they have a decent life. When God shows up, says there is only one God, and by the way, leave your whole life, go to the place I will show you and I will make of you a great nation (Genesis 12:1). So off you go, with your wife and your nephew. And it goes ok, but no kids come along, so that "great nation" thing isn't going to happen. Then Sarai send Hagar to you and Ishmael is born, and while it wasn't exactly what you were expecting, it's great to have a son, a child of your own, so life is more than ok.

And then God shows up again. And says, in essence, "When I make a promise, I keep my promise. You may be 99 years old, but you will father a child with Sarai." Seriously, falling on your face and laughing is not an unreasonable response. God is going about this thing the wrong way. Start out with younger parents if you want to found a nation and a line of kings.

Or put yourself in Peter's shoes. You've been following Jesus of Nazareth around. He's been healing people and casting out demons. Lives have been changing. Crowds are amassing. All the signs are there and you're paying attention. Suddenly there's a pop quiz. Jesus says, "Who do people say that I am?" And everybody gets it wrong. "John the Baptist" Wrong. "Elijah". Wrong. One of the prophets. Wrong. Plus whoever guessed that didn't even have the courage to say which one. Then Jesus asks, "Who do you say I am?" (Mark 8:29) You've got this. You're on it. "You're the Messiah." you say to Jesus. (Mark 8:39) And then he goes on to talk about great suffering and being rejected and being killed (Mark 8:31). He's going about this Messiah thing the wrong way. That's not how Messiahs work. They triumph. They kick a little butt. A certain percentage of evil doers get taken down. And God's kingdom arrives.

We're called to be stewards of the gifts we've been given. That's the money we give to the church. That's the time we give to the church. That's the challenges the church takes on with the money and talents we have. But it's also the knowledge that we have. I have no idea how to deal with a pipe that has a tiny uphill rise on the way to the septic tank. But I know how to call Ron and Peter and Bob and ask them to put their heads together. Being stewards of what we know and sharing that knowledge around is what we are called to do.

Fine. So some woman over 50 says to me at coffee hour, "Whoa. Hot flash. Baby factory is closed." And then someone comes up to me and says they think she's pregnant, I'm going to say, "As a woman of a certain age, I think you need some more data. You might want to do a fact check on that." Because biology is biology. I may not be a doctor, but I have some useful firsthand knowledge that I can share.

Abram is in that same place. God promised him an heir and while Ishmael isn't Sarai's son, he is Abram's son. So there's no reason for Abram to complain to God about Abram's life. Abram can share what he has, be a good neighbor, honor God. Abram can be a good steward of what he's been given. Which is, frankly, quite a lot.

Peter has it even worse. He's relying on the knowledge of Messiahs he's been taught in his faith community. There is a tradition that says they are either kings or military generals. They triumph in battle because God is on their side. People were good stewards of the knowledge they gave him. He's being a good steward of that knowledge and sharing it with Jesus.

Stewardship is a cycle with seasons. Right now we are looking at what we have and really working to figure out how to best do the work God is calling us to do with what we've been given. We are talking about how to reach out to the community more effectively, how to share our wonderful music ministry, how to meet needs of folks who aren't here. There is so much goodness we experience here, week in and week out, and we are really working on figuring out how to steward that love of God we experience.

When we learn something that we think would be useful to other people, we share it. *Black Panther* is awesome people have told me. Try Trader Joe's canned corn. Honestly, and not to pick on him, but John Panto's really digging the book group. It's worth the price of admission just to see how much fun he's having there. Don't get me started on the Outreach Committee. We met in my office on Wednesday night. I was afraid someone from AA was going to knock on the door and tell us to keep it down. If we are being faithful stewards of what we know, we have to share what we have experienced that has brought us in contact with God's abundance.

And we are also in the season of Lent, in the season of penitence, when we try to remain more cognizant of our sins, of what we do that separates us from the love of God. We are too often like Abram, like Peter. God is doing God's work in the wrong way and we know better.¹

Jesus tells not only Peter, not only the rest of the 12 disciples, but the whole crowd what discipleship means. It means suffering. It means rejection. Following Jesus means taking up our cross and following him. For moment, imagine the story of the crucifixion where Jesus is accused by those in power, but the people, the crowds, still support him. As he carries his cross to Golgotha, people are still laying palm fronds and cloaks in his path. They stand in witness to his suffering, weeping, calling out to the authorities to not commit this dreadful wrong. Imagine Jesus going to his terrible death surrounded by the people he loved, surrounded by the people who loved him, who stay with him to the end, who offer to take his place if only the authorities will allow it.

That is not the death we see in Scripture. The death we imagined has a golden glow of glory about it.² We see him rejected by people who know perfectly well he has cast out demons, he has healed the sick. We see him abandoned by people who knew him better than anyone else on earth and still they left him to suffer alone. His death is awful not only because of the terrible pain in the cross itself. His death is awful because of the rejection by people who knew how utterly wrong their rejection was.

We are going to invite people to join us at this church, people who know us really well, and they are going to reject us. And it's going to hurt. If we steward our resources so we never know rejection, never suffer for that rejection, we have not picked up our cross to follow Jesus.³ As we

¹ William H. Willimon, "Taking up the cross." *The Christian Century* 100, no. 6: (1983), 173.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 87.

³ Paul C. Shupe, "Second Sunday in Lent, Pastoral Perspective, Mark 8:31-38" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 2*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008], 70.

reach out to the community, some of them, many of them, most of them, are going to turn us down, and not delicately. In some cases, we will mess up the invitation. But in some, we are merely pressing on old bruises, on old damage done in another place and time. But the rejection will hurt all the same.

When you look at today's story of Abram and today's story of Peter, here is some knowledge you might want to share with others. Their sin, the thing that separated them from the love of God, was their failure to believe the promise of God's good news.⁴ They were unable to believe that God would bestow life-giving, future-creating resources on them.⁵ They cannot bring themselves to know that God is creating a newness underived from what existed before.⁶

As we celebrate this season of stewardship, when we are challenging ourselves and each other to make the most of what we have been given, let us be faithful disciples. Let us seek out opportunities to take up our crosses to be rejected and to suffer in that rejection. Let us never assume we know how God should go about God's business in this world. Let us pray that God creates something wholly new through us, so that we may deepen and leverage our knowledge of what it means to be stewards and disciples.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), 156.

⁵ Brueggemann, 156.

⁶ Brueggemann, 157.