Homily, Lent 2B

February 28, 2021

S. Stephen’s, Providence

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our readings this morning have at their core

the theme of faith.

I think that too often, we think of faith as a one-directional activity:

we – humans –

are to have faith in things we cannot see –

we are supposed to have faith in God,

and the obligation is on us to do the work, and the heavy lifting.

Faith is, essentially, a human activity directed towards God.

However,

as we saw in the covenant that God established with all the earth and Noah

in our reading last week,

God has at times established a covenant in which the burden is entirely on him.

After the flood,

God promises all the creatures of the earth

that he will never do anything like that again,

and that he – not they – he will be the one to be reminded of this covenant

whenever there is a rainbow in the sky.

This morning,

we encounter covenant again –

this time, between Abraham and God.

Many of you know this story already –

Abraham and Sarah are unable to conceive children.

They are at this point quite old and beyond child-bearing years.

However,

God assures Abraham of his intent to fulfill the promise he has made to him:

that he will be a father of many descendants and nations.

He will go from being Abram – “exalted father” –

to Abraham – “father of many.”

What occurs here becomes very important for the first Christians,

as we have seen in our Epistle Reading this morning.

Paul seizes upon Abraham and his faith as the defining characteristic

of this covenant between God and his people.

Not blood, or any ethnic or tribal bonds, or the keeping of the Law of Moses.

It is faith that has been the constant the whole time,

from Abraham up to Jesus Christ,

who establishes a New Covenant in his blood,

and which likewise requires faithfulness –

faith that is open to Gentile and Jew alike.

Furthermore, this covenant based on faithfulness begun with Abraham

goes both ways:

Abraham is faithful, and his faith is reckoned to him as righteousness,

but God is also faithful –

God is faithful in his promises and in the fulfilling of his promises to Abraham.

Faith, here, then, is a two-way street.

It takes two to tango in this particular dance.

God will continue to come to his people again and again and again.

They will fail at times to live up to their end of the bargain,

and yet he will return to them, every time.

This is the theme that will emerge over the course of our Lenten season,

culminating in the reading from Ezekiel at the Easter Vigil

of the Valley of Dry Bones.

After being put in mind over the weeks of Lent of God’s covenants with us,

we hear the scope of salvation history at the Easter Vigil

arriving at these words and this particular promise:

“Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act," says the Lord.”

Not only is God the God of Abraham,

and a God who will make Abraham the father of many:

he is a God who will create a new and restored Israel,

whose descendants will be more than anyone can count,

and who will be given eternal life with their God –

unending life.

Jesus himself often has much to say about faith.

If you pay attention during almost all of the healing and miracle stories,

the defining characteristic of the person being healed is their faith:

their belief even before Jesus does anything

that he does indeed have the power to do it.

And Jesus’s response at times is, “Go. Your faith has made you well.”

Curiously missing from our Gospel reading today, however,

is any mention of faith.

Instead, we hear the call to take up our cross and follow Jesus.

He puts the demands and the high stakes of following him in stark terms:

“For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

Life and death. No ifs, ands, or buts about it.

He has set before us life, and death.

Of course, paradoxically, it is dying here that leads to real living.

This whole discourse follows a dramatic scene with Peter,

who seems to have forgotten what Jesus has been teaching and preaching

the whole time he’s been with him.

Jesus tells his disciples that he must undergo great suffering and be killed,

but that he will also rise again on the third day.

This is not what Peter signed up for!

This is not the vision of glory and a restored Israel that he has been hoping for.

How can this be?

Peter essentially begins to tell Jesus off and give him a piece of his mind

before Jesus erupts at him with that stinging and infamous rebuke:

“Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your things not on divine things, but on human things.”

In other words,

you’ve let worldly visions of grandeur and exaltation cloud your thoughts –

the worldly ways of Rome and of Empire,

based on power, greed, and exploitation –

authority that comes from force and not from love.

Get behind thee, Satan.

We might also say that Jesus is angry and frustrated with Peter,

***because of his lack of faithfulness here***.

Why should he doubt the truth of what Jesus has just told them?

Has he ever given them reason to doubt him before?

They are so close to the end of this earthly mission –

how could Peter still be getting it wrong?

Poor Peter – and yet, I suspect we would all behave the same way.

We would be unable to see the larger picture,

which is of Jesus’s faithfulness –

faithfulness to the mission of God, and of bringing about the kingdom of God.

Underscoring the entire passage from Mark this morning

is this realization:

it is not Jesus’s *mission* to die,

rather, it is his **faithfulness** to God’s healing mission

that will inevitably *result* in his death.

In Mark, the language of “must” that Jesus uses around his suffering and death

is not because somehow the whole point of his mission is atoning sacrifice:

Jesus “must” die because his commitment to human healing will not falter.

With two millennia of Holy Weeks under our belts,

we can easily underestimate the power of this point.

Essentially, Mark is saying that the Son of God

will not dial down his ministry to spare his own life,

or even to ease his suffering.

His commitment to the healing of humanity literally knows no limits.

And neither—Easter tells us—does God’s life-giving power.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Such is God’s faithfulness toward us –

and so we are called to have faith in God’s faithfulness.

It is a reciprocal activity, and not one dependent on us alone.

We are to have faith in God’s abiding presence with us,

even in the most challenging of times.

We are called to be faithful, which will be reckoned to us as righteousness.

We are to be faithful to one another, and to God.

Abraham was nearly one hundred years old when God told him

that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the night sky.

As St. Paul quips, his body was as good as dead!

But Abraham had faith, and God’s faithfulness prevailed.

As Jesus makes clear in our Gospel reading today,

we are to be unwavering in our faith,

even when he is being killed and is dying – when all seems lost and done –

a metaphor for the current situation of the wider church if ever there was one.

Be faithful.

Trust in God’s ability to bring about what God will bring about.

God will always provide, and God is always faithful.

Like Abraham, our faith will be reckoned to us as righteousness.

As St. Paul writes,

“Now the words, “it was reckoned to him,” were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.”

Thanks be to God for the victory he has given us in Christ Jesus.

To the God that is faithful –

to him be honor, power, and glory,

now and for ever more. Amen.

1. Ira Brent Driggers, Associate Dean of Academic Programs and Professor of New Testament, Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary of Lenoir-Rhyne University, Columbia, South Carolina. Writing for workingpreacher.org [↑](#footnote-ref-1)