

A Sermon by Rev. Eric R. Dillenbeck
“Invited In”
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
August 10, 2008
Genesis 12:1-5; 17:1-7, 15-19

As I sit at the beginning of my ministry here with all of you it is my joy to be invited to kick off an opportunity for the pastors to share a bit of our faith journeys.

As I was sitting at home one night, working out how to share part of my story with you, I was interrupted by an old high school friend on Facebook. We got to chatting and she could not believe that I was a pastor, she could not even believe I was a part of the church.

You see, before going to college I did not go to church. I was curious about church, I visited almost every denomination with my friends' families, but faith was elusive and church seemed so fake and pretentious and I did not hesitate to share my opinion.

Growing up in Charleston, SC was a wonderful blessing, surrounded by the natural beauty of the beaches, the picturesque city streets, the sunshine, warmth and hospitality. But in many ways that beauty did nothing but cast shadows on the brokenness I saw around me – people more concerned with image than reality, more concerned with the tourists who were coming to the city than the poorest members of our city. As a visitor, it seemed as if the churches were not helping.

I remember feeling as if I had to be perfect when I tagged along to church.

On those occasions when I did go to church the gospel being preached was not, in my opinion, grace-filled. The message I heard preached in those churches was very much a Gospel of “IF.” “If” you did this then you were worthy.

“If” you looked a certain way then you were acceptable.

“If” you accepted Jesus Christ then God would love you.

Ok, I have already admitted that I did not grow up in the church, so it is safe to assume that I did not grow up in church school, I did not do all those crafty projects that help children remember the message that God is LOVE, but somehow, somehow, I knew God's love and I knew what I was seeing and feeling in those churches was not Godly.

I remember arguing with friends about the need to dress up to go to church. I remember my heart groaning when I would see everyone fake smiles and pretend all was fine for their church friends when I knew their businesses were failing and their families were hanging on by a thread.

And finally, I remember a friend telling me I was going to burn in hell because I would not join his Pentecostal church and because I associated with gay people, because I hung around with my African American brothers and sisters.

In the eyes of his church and his God I had not done any of the things that I had to do to EARN God's love so I was unlovable.

And so that friend I reconnected with the other day laughed at the idea of me being a pastor because she knew how bitter I was with church before going to college.

But what she did not know was that on my first day at Clemson University I encountered grace when a friend convinced me to go to church to visit a friend of hers. What I experienced when I walked in those doors was for me, unforgettable.

For the first time, I recognized a church community that did very little faking, a community that openly struggled with what it meant to believe, a community that invited me to sit and rest and challenged me to explore my faith, a community that more than anything affirmed the fact that we are all beloved children of God.

It was in this community that I first read the wonderfully flawed stories of our Grandparents in faith, Abraham and Sarah, the passages we will be reading today.

The first part of their story comes from:

Genesis 12:1-5a

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

⁴So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. ⁵Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan.

Genesis 17:1-7 & 15-22

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. ²And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” ³Then Abram fell on his face; (*God ignores the laughter*) and God said to him, ⁴“As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁵No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁶I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and rulers shall come from you.

⁷I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

(this skips the circumcision details)

¹⁵God said to Abraham, “As for Sarah your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; rulers of peoples shall come from her.” ¹⁷Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, “Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?”

¹⁸And Abraham said to God, “O that Ishmael might live in your sight!” ¹⁹God said, “No, but your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. ²⁰As for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall be the father

of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. ²¹But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year.” ²²And when God had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham.

The Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God!

My family has some obvious ties to these stories. If Anna had been a boy, her name would have been Isaac. Our youngest daughter, Sarah, was named for our Biblical grandmother found here in these passages.

For a number of reasons the Abraham and Sarah narratives are some of my favorites in the Bible.

They tell of a flawed people who live by grace alone. They tell of a people living in the shadow of a promise, waiting and waiting for fulfillment. They tell a very human story of restlessness, fear and a need for control. But more than anything they tell the story of GRACE - Undeserved, unearned, freely - given - grace.

God comes to Abraham and Sarah, at an advanced age, (they are 75 years old) and tells them to pick up everything and go. They are supposed to leave all they know and journey to an unknown land; so their name would be made great - so that in them all the families of the earth would be blessed. They have been blessed to be blessing.

And the crazy thing is, Sarah and Abraham do it. They pack up everything, the sheep, the kitchen, the tents, their servants. They pack up their entire lives, they leave the safety and security of home and journey into the unknown on nothing but the promise of God.

And it is quite a journey, with many twists and turns that stretched on longer than anyone could have imagined. They traveled for years, wondering when they would see those promises of God fulfilled and when things got too stressful they began to take the promise keeping into their own hands.

A famine strikes Canaan, so Abraham went down into Egypt for food. Afraid Pharaoh would kill him in order to have his beautiful wife, he lied and said Sarah was his sister and in her upper 70s, she almost became the newest member of Pharaoh's harem. But God rescued Sarah by sending great plagues, and the family hit the road again. Abraham bargained with his nephew, Lot, for land. He went to war with four eastern kings.

And while Abraham fought, Sarah schemed for a child. According to local custom she gave her maid Hagar to her husband that he might father a child by her, and Ishmael was born to Hagar. In the end this scheme does not work out so well for Sarah. She gets jealous of Hagar and sends them away.

Abraham and Sarah are less than perfect. In fact, they do a great job of showing all their blemishes, all their flaws. They do everything than can to show that they do not deserve God's promises. But Through all of this, God is present with them. God comes again and again and reaffirms the covenant. Even when they have wrenched control away from God and had things fall down around them God was present, offering Grace, reminding them that they have been blessed to be a blessing.

There are no "ifs," there are no "whens," just grace. That grace elicits a grateful response. It did not demand anything, but it invited Abraham and Sarah and as heirs of that covenant, it invites us into relationship with God. It invites us to remember that we have been blessed to be a blessing. It invites us to remember that we have been called to live our lives before God, just as we are, with all of our warts, with all of our blemishes, with all of our love.

So, as I stand here at the beginning of my ministry with all of you, I stand just as I am, with love in my heart, with joy in my spirit, confident that we have been blessed to be a blessing. May it be so.

Thanks be to God.

The Rev. Eric R. Dillenbeck, M.D.V.-