“This Far By Faith”
Rev. Eric Dillenbeck
March 8, 2009
Fairmount Presbyterian Church

I am not quite sure how it happened, but we turned around and found ourselves in the middle of LENT; a season when our spiritual hungers are supposed to rule over the worldly hungers that flood our senses. It is a season of prayer, repentance and self-discipline when Christians rededicate themselves for the journey of faith that lies ahead.

During this time “Henri Nouwen once described, as the season during which winter and spring struggle with each other for dominance, we are called to a greater openness to the Word of God, to examine the integrity of our motives, and to a conversion in every area of our lives.[i]”

During the forty days of Lent we imitate Jesus’ withdrawal into the desert where he prayed and fasted while being tempted prior to undertaking his public ministry. In the Bible, forty days is a pretty traditional number. Moses stayed on the mountain with God for 40 days, Elijah traveled for 40 days before he reached the cave where he had his vision, in the book of Jonah, Nineveh was given 40 days to repent. There is a certain fullness to 40 days, a sense of discipline.

The desert is another common motif in scripture. The Hebrews passed through the waters of the Red Sea into the desert where they wandered for 40 years before being guided into the promised-land. Jesus routinely retreated into the desert, or the wilderness, to fast and pray during his life.

The desert is a barren, dry place of preparation that reminds people of what is really important in life.
For centuries, Christians have walked through the desert of Lent in order to help us remember what is really important. Many would imagine that the texts of Lent would have us prostrating ourselves before God asking for forgiveness, but again and again we are reminded of the knots that tether God’s thread of grace to humanity.
It is as if the creators of our Lectionary are drawing a dotted line through the stories of our faith, helping us to put the events of Easter, toward which we shift our focus in this season of Lent, in the larger context of God’s covenant with all creation.

So as we journey through these forty days in the desert of Lent together let us listen for the Word of God speaking to us from another desert story, found in…

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 [NRSV]

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. [2]And I will make my covenant
between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." [3]Then Abram fell on
his face; 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. [5]No longer shall your name be Abram, but your
name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. [6]I
will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come
from you.
[7]I 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.

[15]God said to Abraham, "As for Sarah your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah
shall be her name. [16]I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will
bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

The Word of the Lord Thanks be to God

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Our passage today takes place many generations after the events surrounding Noah's Arc, but the story continues to follow Noah's descendents, who re-adjusted to living on dry land. Noah's sons are now great-grandparents themselves and their descendents forgot God's covenant and became obsessed with their own glory and power, but God did not forget the rainbow covenant. Instead, God looks with favor upon Abram, another of Noah's many descendents, and prepares his family for a brighter future.

At this point in the story of Genesis, Abram and Sarai, his wife, find themselves in the midst of the desert into which God called them. In chapter 12, God told them to pick up everything; their livestock, family, servants and leave all they knew to travel into the unknown, to travel toward a land that has been promised to them by God. They deviated from God's vision and wandered into Egypt to avoid a famine and the Pharaoh took Sarai as his own, but God rescued them. They separated from their nephew and when Lot and his people were captured Abram went to war to save his family. When they believed the promise of a child was going to go unfulfilled they planned an infidelity that resulted in an heir and Sarai was extremely jealous and unhappy.

As you can see things were not perfect on their journey, but in the story of Abram and Sarai we see that in the barrenness of the wilderness to which they had been called, God's promises greet them again and again. Each time God comes to reaffirm the covenant the promises become richer and more poignant, but God's announcement of covenant is more than an assurance of friendship and solidarity. It is a guarantee of a future for Abram and Sarai's family.

For the first time God is described as God Almighty or God All–Knowing; the Hebrew word is El Shaddai which represents God's claim on the future. This name is intended to convey to readers that God's promises will hold true to this couple and will be present forever in the many nations that will rise from these two flawed but faithful servants of God. This encounter with God Almighty is so significant even God recognizes the relationship has changed and proceeds to rename Abram and Sarai. No longer will they be known by the names given to them by their parents, but by names given to them by the one who makes a path through the barrenness.

When Abraham and Sarah were unbelievably old, God Almighty spoke to them, commanding them to live out their lives in God's presence and covenanting with them that Yahweh will make them exceedingly numerous and will be God to them and to their offspring after them." The authors of this passage make it quite clear that this covenant and promise is all on the side of God who initiates this relationship. This is not only an everlasting covenant (v. 7) but one established and enacted by the One who is everlasting. This makes perfect sense, because God's salvation for us in Jesus Christ is entirely the work of God's love and grace. It is not ultimately dependent upon our response or good worksii.

Thanks be to God that the gracious gift of grace is not dependent upon our response; because our response is probably pretty similar to the way Abraham and Sarah responded. We do not see this in today's text, but in the face of this amazing promise Abraham falls on his face in a toothless cackle and Sarah laughed at the impossible thought of becoming pregnant.

Their laughter recognized this unanswered promise of God was hanging in the air around bodies bent by age and long since been able to bear children, but as we know from the story of Sarah and Abraham that promise does not go unfulfilled. Isaac is born to Abraham and Sarah and through Isaac God's promise still hangs in the air around us.

Each day we live into this covenantal promise in new ways, and like Abraham and Sarah we laugh at the impossibility of the idea. We are called to "live our lives before God," and in our living we see that embodying this covenant is not always an easy thing to do. Kathleen Norris says, "to be chosen of God is not something people choose for themselves. For Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Jacob, Ruth, Jeremiah,

Isaiah, Mary, and Jesus, himself, being God's chosen does not mean doing well. It does not grant access to all the answers but means contending with hard questions, thankless tasks, and usually a harrowing journey, which is Jesus' case, leads to the crossiii."

On our journey we laugh because we are intimately aware of our limitations and abilities and we have seen the rigors of the journey to which God calls us. We doubt our abilities because we see on a regular basis how distractions get in the way of our commitments to God; news of the world's economic crises, which is so strongly felt here in our city and state, continues to undermine the shaky ground upon which our hope is built; struggles with what it means to be a disciple of Jesus in the face of global poverty rock our faith in your sovereign care.

But then we remember Isaac. The impossible child, the one born to parent's bent by age. In him we see a glimpse of grace for the generations to come and we remember our Almighty God, our El Shaddai, who has promised to be our God and to be the God of our descendents, the one who has got us this far by faith.

During Lent we are reminded of Abraham and Sarah and how they are one of the knots anchoring God's thread of grace to our lives. While this grace does not depend upon our response it certainly invites a response. In the face of God's covenant faithfulness may we journey together through the desert of Lent to tackle and wrestle with our own questions and struggles, to pray and grow closer in relationship with God and one another so that we may begin to see the world the way God wants it to be and then have the courage and conviction to go forth and live our faith so that the world might know the good news of Easter morning.

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[i] Adapted from a quote on page 81 by Michael Ford in Eternal Seasons: A Liturgical Journey with Henri J.M. Nouwen.
[ii] Quoted from an online lectionary commentary found at textweek.com
[iii] Kathleen Norris, Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith, pg 141 – Riverhead Books, 1998