



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Lent 2 (B)

#### Unpredictable

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

God's truth is unchangeable. But it's not predictable.

Do you ever wish we lived in *precedented* times? Maybe live a week without a once-in-a-hundred-years catastrophe, without shock and surprise in the news, without a rupture in our day-to-day that might make things feel out of control?

It's meaningful that our collect today lists penitent hearts before steadfast faith— as if acknowledging faith only comes with great humility, letting go of our own control. God's truth is unchangeable and offers a foundation and stability that we must hold onto as the world swirls around us. But that doesn't mean we can assume or predict or anticipate what God will do in our lives and our world. Indeed, the only thing we can (or even should) land on as solid and unchanging is the truth that God loves us.

Being a penitent and faithful Christian requires interrogating our assumptions of the ways the world works and God works. And story after story in our Scripture, tradition, and experience points to this. God moves, calls, and pulls in ways that are surprising, unpredictable, creative, whimsical— even shocking!

The story of Abraham and Sarah is, at its core, one of surprise. They have made a logical assumption that they won't be able to have kids of their own together (to read about how they have taken matters into their own hands, see the story of Hagar and Ishmael!) and they turn to living their lives as faithful Jews.

Then God moves. And when God moves, Abram, his original name before God's renaming ceremony, falls on his face. He assumes a posture of humility. And then he rides the wave of the impossible. God blesses Abram and Sarai in ways no one could have predicted— not only with children but with the blessing of covenant. Like a marriage, like a religious vow, like a sacred contract, God solidifies a relationship with Abram and Sarai through a covenant and a promise, and they are transformed.

They are so transformed they even get new names that demonstrate their new blessing, their new identities. The name Sarai signifies “my lady,” or “my princess,” the matriarch of one family. “Sarah” expands that identity to “Lady,” or “Princess,” one for the multitude, not just a particular line. Similarly, in Hebrew, the name Abram means “exalted father” and Abraham means “father of a multitude.” Their new identities are without restriction, expanded in a way they could never have imagined.

What would happen if we were open to the impossible? Open to being surprised, open to being transformed? How would our lives – individual and communal – change if we walked around being open to being transformed, to meeting God in ways that are unexpected and surprising? It’s a vulnerable, humble place to be, to let go of our assumptions, especially in a relationship as personal and intimate as ours with the Divine. To interrogate our assumptions means we are open to our very identities changing and expanding in ways only God can dream of.

Building our house on the truth that God loves us does not mean we know what God will do. God’s power is not of a dictator or general, but of the power of the sea and art. It stirs in ways we could never imagine and can sweep us off our feet.

The Psalmist (probably David) understands this and articulates praise of this power: “Praise the Lord, you that fear him; stand in awe of him!” We praise God and stand in awe of God, but not in a way that paralyzes: “I will perform my vows in the presence of those who worship him.” We come together to discern God’s call and try to keep up with the Holy Spirit as she steers us in unpredictable ways.

Paul understands this, of course, and hearkens back to the story of Abraham and Sarah as he teaches the early church in Rome. Paul’s agenda for the first generation of followers of Jesus is one of inclusion and expansion– that God’s covenant with Abraham can include all people. He teaches that God’s promises to Abraham and Sarah were not because they were following the right rules or were the right kind of person. It was because they were faithful. Abraham was the most esteemed because of faith, not works– because even the best works will fall short of the glory of God.

In our Gospel today, Jesus says we must lose our life in order to save our life. Maybe that means giving up predictability, a sense of control, in order to surrender to God’s mystery. Jesus’ entire ministry reflects the surprising ways that God works in the world, the way God takes human assumptions and turns them on their head.

In this scene from the gospel, when Jesus reveals that he will suffer, that he will be rejected and defeated by his political rivals, the disciples are shocked. “What is this suffering Savior?” they wonder. The savior is supposed to be a great king, a warrior, a super-human. Throughout generations, the

Messiah was predicted to be a king descending from David, an *Übermensch* who crashed in to conquer oppression and stomp on enemies and vindicate God's people. This is the hope of oppressed people.

Instead, Jesus assumes a posture of humility (remember that theme?) and allows himself to suffer, suffer as we do. It's a shocking twist, that the savior Messiah would suffer death. But in God's surprising unpredictability, Jesus expands our understanding of the Divine to include the experience of humanity— from birth to death. Jesus' entire life is a testament to God's covenant and blessing. God loves us so much that God sent Jesus as a human. A human who cried, got angry, got hungry, fought with his friends, and even died. That's a twist that both challenges assumptions and personalizes the Divine in a way that builds intimacy and personal relationship.

Sometimes, it's really hard to accept God's twisty-turny way of working. Peter gets that. And releases his own confusion and anger, perhaps loss of control, by arguing with Jesus. What do you think he said to his friend? "Jesus, listen, there's another way." "C'mon Jesus, you don't mean that." "Jesus, let's think of some other options." But Jesus rebukes him, directly and openly. He reminds Peter, and all of his disciples, and us today, that God's story isn't ours to have as we will.

As soon as we look for the convenient, comfortable, cozier way to follow God's call in our lives, we have lost the power of Jesus' death and, therefore, his resurrection. Because the death and resurrection— and the surprising unpredictability of God's story— is what it means to be a Christian. It's not convenient, and it's not easy. It's neither a get-out-of-jail card nor a ticket to heaven.

Being a Christian means holding on for dear life to God's love while we try to follow the Holy Spirit in our lives and community. Lent, as a season, invites us to a posture of humility and openness that emphasizes – not penitence, necessarily – but openness. Vulnerability. A willingness to be transformed, a willingness to admit that we don't know all. God constantly surprises. Will we be open and humble enough to be transformed?

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