

Again and Again, We Are Called To Listen
Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-16; Romans 4: 13-25
Ann Hatfield

One of my greatest joys as a minister is baptizing a child. It is a remarkable privilege full of hope and happiness! After twelve months – but what has felt like twelve, LONG, pandemic YEARS – we had the joy of celebrating a baptism last Sunday during the contemporary service. For a congregation accustomed to monthly baptisms, the interval felt like an eternity of waiting and barrenness.

With COVID safety restrictions still in place, we had to re-imagine our baptism practices with creative adjustments. Instead of Pastor Jon holding the child, his parents held him. Instead of pouring water from his hand, Jon scooped water from the baptismal font with a shell. Instead of celebrating this sacrament in a sanctuary full of worshipers, the parents were joined in-person by only two sets of grandparents.

And yet . . . and yet, Bennett James Collins was joyfully baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

As Presbyterians, we baptize babies with the understanding that God claims our children as God's own beloved sons and daughters in covenant love. In baptism, we believe the invisible grace of God is made visible in this sacrament. It is a sign and seal of God's covenant.

Throughout the Bible, the overarching narrative is one of covenant relationships between God and God's people. Last week, Pastor Don preached about God's covenant with Noah. After flooding the earth, God makes a promise to NEVER AGAIN respond to human sin with such devastating judgment and destruction. Instead, God adopts a different approach, vowing to always be FOR humanity.

I recently came across the story of a battleship taking part in night maneuvers in the Pacific Ocean. Across the dark expanse of water, a light is visible. The admiral on deck tells his signalman to radio the distant vessel. "Inform them their ship is on a collision course with this battleship, and they must change course." The reply asks the admiral to change HIS course instead.

Unaccustomed to disobedience, the admiral radios back, "I am an admiral, and I am ORDERING you to change YOUR course." Back comes another reply, "Sir, I am a radioman third class, and I am asking you to change your course." The admiral sends a final, forceful message: "We are a battleship!" A reply comes back: "Sir, we are a lighthouse."¹

Like the admiral, sometimes we are abruptly confronted with a new perception of reality. This is true of Sarai and Abram in today's passage from Genesis. God appears to Abram

when he is 99 years old, and his wife Sarai is 90. Sarai has always been childless. Her womb has been an empty place, where new life seems impossible.

After years of unrelenting waiting and barrenness, God suddenly speaks a new promise to Sarai and Abram: a son will be born to them. This new reality seems contrary to reason and beyond all hope of fulfillment. But like a battleship changing course to avoid a lighthouse, the life of this couple changes direction when God shows up and says, *"I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous."*

In an astounding act of goodness and grace, God binds God's own self in covenant relationship with Sarai, Abram, and their future offspring. In recognition of their new direction in life, God bestows on Abram and Sarai new names: Abraham and Sarah. While God's covenant begins with a particular promise to this couple – like with Noah – it extends out into a universal blessing for all creation. Abraham and Sarah are to be parents of a multitude of nations in an EVERLASTING covenant.

To Abraham and Sarah – and to you and me – God's promise for this aged, childless couple to be parents – not just of one son – but of generations of multiethnic offspring seems laughable, if not downright absurd. How is this even possible???

The Apostle Paul provides an answer in his letter to the Romans. *Hoping against hope*, Abraham believed God could make the impossible possible. Sarah and Abraham had faith that God's covenant did NOT depend on their own efforts. Faith, you see, is not about human ability or understanding. Rather, faith is trusting the promises of God. Nothing is impossible for God Almighty, *"who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist."*

Hundreds of years ago, Saint Theresa set out to build a convent. She had twelve pennies to her name. Someone commented, "Not even Saint Theresa can accomplish much with twelve pennies." "True," she answered, "but Saint Theresa with twelve pennies AND GOD can do anything."²

In his letter, Paul also wants to clear up a misunderstanding about the ways you and I seek a relationship with God. One option is to pursue a right relationship through our own efforts and merits. Like a battleship taking on a lighthouse, this course of action is doomed to failure. We refuse to listen. We are reluctant to change. We make mistakes. We are not perfect.

FAITH works the other way. It is the Lord God Almighty who does the work of calling you and me into covenant relationship. That call is a gift of grace – unearned and undeserved. Again and again, we are invited to see, not what we can do for God, but what God has ALREADY done for each of us – and all of us.

While every baptism is special, the sacrament last week was especially poignant. Joyful celebrations were rare in 2020. The past year has been burdened with much illness, sorrow, and death. It has been full of challenges, cancelations, and disappointments.

Tragically, this past week the United States surpassed 500,000 COVID deaths – half a million – in our nation alone – a number greater than our country’s total combined deaths from WWI, WWII, and the Vietnam War.

In light of these staggering deaths and other losses over the past year, next Sunday’s worship will include opportunities to remember and mourn. While we lament, we also will dream of a better future. We find hope in our hearts, because we continue to have faith in God’s everlasting covenant of grace, which is dependent on God’s ability, not on yours or mine.

Someone once said, “I have found that you cannot prove the promises of God in advance, but if you live them – if you live them, you find they are true – every one of them.”³

Again and again, we are called to LISTEN and to TRUST the promises of God.

While the waiting and barrenness of this past year may seem unbearable, God will bring us through these final months of the pandemic. Thankfully, this season of sacrifice will not last forever, because God Almighty has the power to fulfill seemingly impossible promises. Faith is our willingness to believe – however grim the past year, and however dark the present moment – that God continues to create a way of promise into a future of hope, when WE THINK there is no way.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.

¹ Adapted from E. Carver McGriff, *Lectionary Preaching Workbook*, p. 114.

² Adapted from H. Michael Brewer, “Preaching on the Lessons,” *The Clergy Journal*, March 1990, p. 19.

³ Adapted from John R. Brokhoff, “Preaching on the Lessons,” *The Clergy Journal*, March 1993, p. 5.