

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Second Sunday in Lent – Year B

RCL Readings – Genesis 17:1-7,15-16; Psalm 22:23-31; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38 or Mark 9:2-9

ACNA Readings – Genesis 22:1-14; Psalm 16[6-12]; Romans 8:31-39; Mark 8:31-38

Seasonal Introduction. Traditionally, Lent is a season of 6 weeks of preparation bringing us to the celebration of Jesus' resurrection.^{1 2} The early church felt that the celebration of the resurrection was something believers should diligently prepare for. Lent is a time of intention to deliberately walk deeper with the Lord in spiritual discipline involving prayer, acts of charity and fasting.

Fasting is a practice that has fallen out of favour in many sections of the Church but fasting was a regular discipline in the spiritual life of the Jewish people at the time of Jesus.³ Intriguingly, Jesus does not say, "If you fast", rather, in Matthew 6:16, He says, "When you fast" implying He is expecting His disciples to actually continue the practice as part of their faith walk.

Common Theme. The walk of faith is neither glamorous nor easy and it most certainly is not void of difficulties. The invitation of the Messiah is to join in the sufferings of Christ. The reward for doing so reveals the paradox—the cross ends in glory. In journeying with Jesus into his death, we also receive the blessings of his resurrection and life. With this knowledge, we are strengthened to look at our readings.

Hebraic Context. When Abram first appears in the Bible, he has no background and no early life stories. We know so very little about him. What we assume we know is largely attributed to oral tradition.⁴ What we do know about Abram from the Scriptures is that everything he had was quickly

¹ The practice of communal fasting leading up to the Great Easter Vigil and Easter was common, as new believers (who had sometimes studied for a year or more in preparation) prepared themselves for baptism during Easter and their new communities joined them in the final days of preparation through fasting.

² While the early church did not immediately practice fasting for forty days before Easter, the practice of a forty day fast had fully developed by the 4th century. This came out of the examples in Scripture, most prominently Jesus' forty days in the wilderness as He approached His time of ministry. Moses' forty days on Mount Sinai and Elijah's journey to Mount Sinai are two additional forty day fasts.

³ According to the earliest non-testament biblical document called the Didache, the early church practiced fasting twice a week on Wednesdays and Fridays. (Didache 8)

⁴ There is a midrash in Genesis Rabbah 38 which describes a scene in Abraham's youth in which he was working in his father's idol workshop in Ur (Joshua 24:2 states that Terah served foreign gods). In this midrash, while Terah (Abram's father) was away on business, Abraham smashed all the idols except one with a hammer. He then placed the hammer in the hand of the largest remaining idol. When his father returned he, of course, demanded to know what happened. Abraham told him that a woman came in to make an offering to the idols. The idols argued about which one should eat the offering first, then the largest idol took the hammer and smashed all the other idols in jealousy. Terah responded by saying that they are only statues and have no knowledge. Whereupon, Abraham responded by stating that Terah denied their knowledge, yet continued to worship them! The midrash is used to explain why God would call Abraham in the first place as there is no explanation given in the Hebrew Bible.

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stripped away from him. Abram was removed from his land, his culture and his extended family—everything that forms part of his identity. As Abram willingly surrendered the life that he had known, he developed a personal relationship with the Living God. The name change to Abraham, in conjunction with his circumcision and his entry into a covenant with God, marked a profound turning point in his life.⁵

While the initial call of Abram included a blessing to the world, up until this point Abram's journey had been more focused on the personal spiritual relationship with the Lord. Abram had personally removed himself from his old life, he had personally accepted the mark of circumcision, (he had also personally become the father of Ishmael). Perhaps, after 13 years of silence from heaven, as Abram became Abraham he began to grasp that his walk with the Lord would affect not just his immediate family but indeed the nations of the world. For ourselves, our own personal journeys might seem small and perhaps insignificant to us, but in Jewish tradition, they can always affect the world. He who saves but one life is as if he has saved the whole universe (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5).

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16. The passage opens with God's call to Abram to walk faithfully before the Lord and to be blameless. This is not the first time Abram has received a call from heaven. Abram was 75 years old when he left Haran with his wife Sarai and nephew Lot. He was 86 years old when Ishmael was born and according to the text it has been approximately 13 years since the Lord had last spoken with Abram. Finally, at 99 years old, the Lord appeared to Abram again, reaffirming his calling of Abram and confirming He would make His promised covenant with him. When God first spoke to Abram in Genesis 12, He made a promise to make Abram into a great nation of blessing. The promise is endorsed through the cutting of animals, which the Lord passes through the separated parts in the form of fire in Genesis 15.⁶ Now, 24 years since the first call of Abram, the Lord proclaimed again the covenant with the command to journey with God.

The call of God never leaves us in the same position or state that we were in before the call. Our calling involves us being better than what we are now. In Genesis 17:1 God calls Abram to be תָּמִים (*tammim*), which can be translated as perfect or blameless. It usually has a ritual or sacrificial connotation⁷ although the first person called *tammim* is Noah in Genesis 6:9 "Noah was a just man, perfect in his

⁵ Both Abram and Sarai were given name changes with the insertion of the letter 'hay' ה into each name. Traditionally, the letter ה has often stood in as a name for God or would often represent the 'ruach' or Spirit of God. There is a Hebraic sense in which God is placing Himself into Abram and Sarai's story by becoming entwined with their changed names.

⁶ While covenants were not always (or often) sealed with blood the word for covenant and 'to cut' (*carat*) are still commonly associated (such as in Genesis 15:18). The verb God used in Genesis 17 was 'to give' (*natan*). One aspect of the covenants with God are that they are gifts given and not something owed, bought, or demanded by right.

⁷ Such as in Exodus 12:5 (and throughout Leviticus and Numbers), where the sacrificial lamb was to be without blemish.

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generations”. The same high calling to be *tammim* is reflected in the New Testament where Jesus also calls us to be “perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect” (Matt 5:48).⁸ Having removed Abram from his identity, his culture, and land, God was beginning to give Abraham a new sense of who he was with a new name, a new people, a new purpose and family. This is a common biblical paradox: we give up the old ways to gain a closer walk with God, with the result having the potential to affect not only those around us but creation itself.

Psalm 22:23-31. The superscript to the psalm cites David as the composer but it resonates with many. Psalm 22 is best known for the opening verse, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” These are the words that Jesus would use on the cross during the crucifixion. Jewish tradition also inserts these words into the prayer of Queen Esther at a moment she did not feel the presence of God. The loss of God’s presence led Esther, according to the story, towards repentance (even from unintentional sin). Only after that was she able to make intercession for the Jewish people against the threat of wicked Haman (Tractate Megillah 15b:7-9, Babylonian Talmud).

The psalm acknowledges that, though we often feel left alone or abandoned by God, the truth is that God has already proven that He can be trusted. Psalm 22:23-31 states that, despite the times we do not see His aid, we should and, indeed, will worship Him. And God is attentive to those in distress, He listens to the poor and all who call out to Him.

We should take notice of that fact; the Lord listens to the poor. Proverbs 19:17 echoes the same theme; ‘Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will repay him for his deed’. The promise in the psalm is that the poor will “eat and be satisfied,” and this will somehow have an influence on the entire world as Psalm 22:27 notes: “All the ends of the earth shall remember the Lord.” Lent is not only a time of fasting or abstaining from something but, more importantly, ensuring those around us can eat and be satisfied—often by inviting them to eat with us.⁹

Romans 4:13-25. One of the issues the apostle Paul had to address to the Roman community, which was a blend of Jewish and Gentile disciples, was the issue of circumcision (Romans 4:9-12). This is the context to the passage here describing the faith of Abraham and the grace of God. Some elements of the Roman community were convinced that physical circumcision was required to be ‘blameless’ before the Lord as the Torah instructed Abraham to be. Paul argues that the call to be blameless actually came before the command for circumcision and thus is available to all nations. Paul argues that, just as Jewish

⁸ Throughout Scripture there are those called blameless, or perfect, Noah, Abraham, and Job. But David, in his Psalm found in II Samuel 22, declares that, “with the blameless man you show yourself blameless”. While we are to imitate God, David believed that there is a reward of God being merciful to the merciful, blameless to the blameless, and a refuge for those who seek Him—even if, like Abram, we have to wait 25 years or, like Job, there are many reasons we feel justified in our complaints.

⁹ Isaiah 58:6-7, “Is not this the fast that I choose: ... Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house?”

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people ought to follow the Torah out of the same believing faith of Abraham, the Gentiles also are all called to walk in the same faith as Abraham who believed the word of the Lord before he was given the Torah or the command of circumcision.

Pauls begins his argument by noting that the call of Abraham occurred before the Torah was given, and so too the promise that he would be a blessing to the nations (Genesis 12). Abraham's willingness to obey the Lord does not come from a fear of transgressing the Law (which was not in place) but from a trust that God will be true to His word.¹⁰ Paul reminds the Romans that Abraham's journey of faith is in the context of grace. In the Hebraic perspective 'grace' is *chen* and carries with it the ideas of kindness and compassion, but also carries the idea of bestowing a gift or favour. Abraham walked with the Lord in faith and in so doing God bestowed a loving gift of blessing to the world. Paul concludes that the ultimate proof for all of this is the resurrection of the Messiah, the King of both Jews and Gentiles.

Mark 8:31-38. The Gospel passage opens by telling us that Jesus began to 'speak openly' about His death. Actually, He does not say His own death specifically but the suffering and rejection of the Son of Man, who He has identified Himself with on many occasions. The Son of Man refers to the eschatological character that is found in the book of Daniel. In Daniel 7 the Son of Man enters the throne of heaven to be acknowledged by the Ancient of Days and given the dominion of the kingdoms of the world. Later, Jewish traditions linked the Son of Man with the Messiah. However, perplexingly to many, the Messiah in Daniel 9:24-26 is 'cut off', indicating a sudden death.

Jesus' plain teaching regarding the Son of Man's impending end certainly shook the messianic expectations of the disciples. According to the more popular view in the early first century this was not something that the Messiah was supposed to do.¹¹ Redemption and God's Kingdom meant the overthrow of the oppressor, not suffering at the hands of the oppressor. Unfortunately, but almost predictably, we then see Peter do something that no disciple should ever do to his rabbi. That is, tell the Master what to do! The relationship between rabbi and student was one of mutual love and respect, but also of diligence and obedience by the student. (The same should be true of our relationship with the Lord; Jesus tells us what to do, we should never presume to tell Jesus what to do.) And Peter is rightly rebuked for his audacity.

¹⁰ Paul uses the word 'faith' many times in the context of Abraham, although the word faith does not appear in the book of Genesis at all. The first time the word faith appears in the Bible is Exodus 17:12. Abraham's trust in the Lord was shown by his obedience—his faithfulness. While Abraham's trust may not have been completely unwavering, his trust was not passive but rather it was shown to be true by his action. Abraham did leave his family and country and journeyed with the Lord. Faith in its Hebraic context is a movement with expectation.

¹¹ A less common teaching, but still well known theory, did include the death of a messiah figure called Messiah ben Joseph.

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Too often our prayer life reflects our desire to inform Jesus of His messianic agenda and how He is going to impact our lives. Perhaps, during this season of Lent, we should take the opportunity to humble ourselves while we journey with Jesus to Easter. To accept that the invitation of the Gospel is the invitation of the Cross, “...whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.”¹²

Mark 9:2-9. The context of the transfiguration of Jesus occurs at a time in His ministry when He was becoming popular. Jesus had been teaching the people concepts about the kingdom of heaven, he had engaged in all manner of healing, defeating demons, performing miracles, and challenging the status quo. The people loved him—so things seem to be going well. Then all of a sudden Jesus took a small group of His disciples privately up a tall mountain.¹³ However, like Mark 8:31-38, Jesus is now turning His face towards his Exodus—His death. Moses and Elijah appeared in this event in discussion with the transfigured Christ.¹⁴ The presence of Moses and Elijah corroborate Jesus’ messianic identity.¹⁵ But Luke adds that they discussed Jesus’ impending *exodus* or His death in Jerusalem.¹⁶

Why are only three disciples given the honour of witnessing the transfiguration? One of the immediate things we can learn from this is that not everyone gets to see a miracle. Jesus has many disciples, most of whom remained at the base of the mountain. Only Peter, James, and John witnessed the miracle of the transfiguration. Despite Jesus, Moses, and Elijah speaking of

¹² The reference to taking up your cross is always in the context of imminent death. The only time a person would ‘take up his cross’ in the ancient world was when he was about to be executed. The willingness to follow Jesus is the willingness to journey with Him right up to martyrdom. This is a calling many people find difficult and too challenging.

¹³ Why are only three disciples given the honour of witnessing the transfiguration? One of the immediate things we can learn from this is that not everyone gets to see a miracle. Jesus has many disciples, most of whom remained at the base of the mountain. Only Peter, James, and John witness the miracle of the transfiguration. Later, they betray, abandon and deny Jesus just like the other disciples who did not witness the transfiguration. Miracles are great, but they do not save people.

¹⁴ The word transfigured is μεταμορφώω, *metamorphoo*, and implies an outward change from a process that begins from within.

¹⁵ Origen, who loved allegory, said that Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the Prophets. Since Origen, that is the way the majority of commentators relate to this event. However, Elijah did not write a prophetic book nor was he the greatest of the prophets—Isaiah is actually the largest prophetic book and contains the most messianic promises while Elisha gains a double portion of Elijah’s power and performs twice as many miracles. Interestingly, Moses was also a prophet (arguably the greatest until John and then Jesus) and it may be that God brought him to the mountain to meet Jesus in his role as prophet. I suggest that Origen’s allegory is perhaps flawed. Moses and Elijah both have roles to play in the messianic kingdom. One like Moses is coming (Deut 18), and Elijah is the forerunner of the Messiah (Malachi 4). Something eschatological is occurring on the mountain.

¹⁶ *Exodus* was often used regarding an upcoming departure—or death. Peter, in his second letter, speaks of his fast approaching *exodus* (II Peter 1:15). Wisdom 3:1-3 uses several synonyms for death, including *exodus*. Josephus uses the term regarding Moses’ departure from the children of Israel before they cross over the Jordan (*Antiquities of the Jews*, 4.189).

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Jesus' *exodus*, the disciples continued to prepare for the messianic king. But when the time came for Jesus to depart, they too betrayed, abandoned, and denied Jesus just like the other disciples who did not witness the transfiguration. Miracles are great, but they do not force people to listen, nor do they save people. At the transfiguration there was a response required of the disciples, one that they would both fail in, but one in which they would also wildly succeed.

Hebraic Perspective. Paradoxical sayings, like the one we see in the Gospel passage, were part and parcel of the Jewish world of late antiquity. Jewish wisdom taught and discussed deep truths through the mystery of paradox. A Hebraic paradox is something in which the opposite of one truth is also true.¹⁷ In relation to paradoxes of faith, the Jewish exegetes would ponder questions such as; can God create a rock that's too heavy even for Him to lift? What is the balance between free will and predestination?¹⁸ Is the Lord in full control of every decision or are there some things that are out of the control of God?¹⁹

Jesus challenges both the messianic expectation of the disciples and the path of discipleship. The journey of salvation is one of self-sacrifice and not one of constant prosperity or glorious conquest of demons, thrones, and powers. To save your life you lose it. You give up something to gain something and that is completely counter-cultural in today's world. To the secular world, this makes no sense. However, as disciples, we acknowledge the ultimate mystery that you cannot gain the resurrection life without first dying.

Optional Context 1

ACNA Readings

Genesis 22:1-14. The story is very familiar to all of us. In summary, Abraham had been commanded by God to offer his son Isaac as a burnt offering in the land of Moriah. After leaving their servants, Abraham and Isaac walked alone towards the place the Lord had told Abraham. Genesis does not mention where the mountains of Moriah are exactly.²⁰ Isaac turned to his father and asked, 'I see the knife, I see the

¹⁷ For instance, "nothing ventured nothing gained" might be opposed to "fools rush in where angels fear to tread" but both can be true. "He who hesitates is lost" is as true as "look before you leap". Either "out of sight, out of mind" or "absence makes the heart grow fonder" can be true, but they can also both be true.

¹⁸ If you were hoping for the answer to this eternal question in the footnote, sadly, it is not here as we are not wiser than the many Holy Spirit in-dwelted saints who came before us. But perhaps it would be wise to understand that Hebraic paradox allows for both to be true as Scripture speaks of both.

¹⁹ One scholar, Rabbi Hanania concluded; "All is in the hands of heaven, except for the awe of heaven, as it says, 'And now, Israel, what does God want from you, other than that you should be in awe of Him?'" (Talmud Berachot 33b).

²⁰ It is Jewish tradition that the Land of Moriah is located over the original Garden of Eden, now Jerusalem. II Chronicles 3:1 connects the Temple Mount and Mount Moriah, which surely would have

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fire, and I am carrying the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?' Abraham replied that God Himself will provide a lamb. The word used for lamb is 'Seh' הֶשֶׁךְ which is the word you would have heard when it was read out in the synagogue. God will provide a 'Seh' הֶשֶׁךְ. Abraham bound Isaac, prepared to slay his son, but was stopped by an Angel of the Lord. He looked up and saw a ram caught in the thicket. Here the word is 'Ayil' אֵיִל. As a hearer of the Bible you heard Abraham clearly say that God will provide a lamb 'Seh' הֶשֶׁךְ, but He didn't, God provided a ram 'Ayil' אֵיִל. You actually heard a different word, the word you might have been expecting to hear was not there.²¹ And that becomes important, especially in the context of Divine Language, which is how Jewish people consider the text.²²

The question for the hearer now becomes, why did God provide a ram when Abraham very clearly said He would provide a lamb? The Hebrew answer, ultimately, was that Abraham was a prophet. God will indeed provide a lamb, however, He will do so in the future. Thus, since Genesis 22 the Jewish People have been waiting for the Lamb of God and this prophetic interpretation began to take on a messianic character and title. We can see this title active and alive in the psyche of the Jewish people in the 2nd Temple Period so much so that when John the Baptist sees Jesus, he declares Him to be "the Lamb of God". The disciples don't ask, what is the Lamb of God? Many disciples stopped following the prophet John and started following Jesus, the Lamb of God.

Psalm 16.²³ David likely wrote the psalm during one of his times of troubles as it begins with a call for preservation.²⁴ However, it's also a beautiful prayer in which David declares loyalty to God by simply stating, "You are my God, apart from you I have no good thing". Loyalty means that you know that God

been in the Land of Moriah. Traditionally, many scholars state that the location of the *Akedah* would have specifically been Mount Moriah rather than simply the region of Moriah.

²¹ At the time of Jesus, people did not read the Bible as much as they heard the Scriptures read. Individual copies of the Bible were few and far between and the Scriptures were the possessions of a community more than they were of an individual. The Jewish community developed the exegetical technique of 'hearing' the Scriptures. They committed large portions of Scripture to memory and picked up on occasions when important words were not heard. One of the classic examples of how hearing the Bible is important is the *Akedah* אֶקֶדָה, the Binding of Isaac as recorded here in Genesis 22.

²² Most Christians would call the Scriptures the Holy Bible, often because that's what is written on the front cover. In the Jewish context text the Bible is the language of God, its His words and therefore is divine. If the Word of God is divine by nature then there cannot be superfluous words in the text; every word must be there for a reason. Following this exegetical thought then words that are not deliberately said, words that you might have expected to appear in the text but did not or were replaced by other perhaps similar words, becomes important too.

²³ Psalm 16 is a *Miktam* of David, similar to Psalms 56-60. Unfortunately, we don't know the meaning of the word *miktam*. The Septuagint doesn't do much to elaborate the meaning as מִכְתָּם is translated simply as *στυλογραφία* (*stylus* and *graphia*). It could indicate that the Psalms were originally written on clay or stone rather than parchment.

²⁴ Psalms 56-60, the other *miktam* Psalms, were also Psalms when David was in direct conflict or troubled by an enemy,

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is not simply God, but that He is ‘my God’. Loyalty and obedience should be personal qualities of the worshiper that can be used to describe aspects of our relationship with God. David knew the Lord as ‘my Lord’ and the psalm reflects some of the good things that come from having a relationship with the Lord, including good counsel and instruction.

There are many gods we can choose, David knew that one of the gods, his God, is the one that has “a beautiful inheritance.” Verse 10 describes a further benefit of choosing loyalty to God, in that David had confidence in the world to come. David had the hope that his soul would not remain in Sheol but that the relationship he had with the Lord would endure after death.²⁵

Romans 8:31-39. The invitation of the Gospel is the invitation to salvation, eternal life, and to join in the work, life and kingdom of God and the Messiah. Looking at the incredible lengths that God has gone to invite us into His kingdom, such as the offering of His own Son on the cross, Paul challenges the believer with this question; who can possibly doubt that God is for us? Conversely, once we make the conclusion that God is indeed for us we should also ask; who can then be against us? This is not to say that because God is on our side then the walk of faith will be an easy one. In reality, the actual daily walk with Jesus might be arduous, probably include an element of suffering, and most likely does not include the prosperity we think we want but honestly don’t need (just as Jesus’ walk displayed). What we truly need is the love of God. Paul declares the good news that nothing that appears to be good nor appears to be evil can separate us from the love of God.

²⁵ Similar to the fact that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are still alive as God is the God of the living.