

Sermon for Sunday, June 11, 2023

Second Sunday after Pentecost

“God of Promise”

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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Decorah, Iowa

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Beloved People of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

It's funny the things that stick with you from childhood. I don't have a great long-term memory but for some reason, the chorus of a song I learned in Sunday School has stayed with me:

I am a promise

I am a possibility

I am a promise with a capital "P"

I am a great big bundle of potentiality

I loved this song as a kid, though I didn't know what potentiality meant. But it came to mind this week because the story of Abram and Sarai stands in such sharp contrast to it. God chooses the two of them to become the family through which God will bless the whole world. And when God chooses Abram and Sarai for this role, they aren't great candidates for the job. They certainly are not great big bundles of potentiality.

They're getting on in years. And in all their long years, they haven't been able to conceive and bear children. They haven't done anything flashy to win God's favor. They certainly don't have the energy of Sunday School kids belting out a song about their promise or the hopefulness of new graduates launching into a bright future. Sarai and Abram are just two names in a long list of names, so and so was the father of so and so who was the father of so and so. The only thing noteworthy about them is that they can't have children.

As they face the ends of their lives without children to keep their memory alive, things feel bleak for them. Then, out of the blue, God comes to Abram and says, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing."

God makes them a promise:

God doesn't say you have a lot of potential, so I will bless you;

God doesn't say, I'm pleased with you, so I will bless you;

God doesn't say, if you clean up your act, I will bless you;

God says, ***go, I will bless you.***

The promise isn't because of who they are. It is because of who God is and what God does. God makes promises. God chooses unlikely people, people without a lot of promise or potential. God does something new when all looks bleak and barren and hopeless. The promise depends upon God, not on Abram and Sarai.

That "I am a Promise" song, and so much of American Christianity, puts the emphasis on the ego's favorite words, ***I*** and ***me***, rather than on ***God***. Every single line of the chorus and of the whole song

starts with *I*, as in *I am, I can*. In the twelve lines of lyrics, the words *I* and *me* show up fifteen times and *God* is mentioned just four times. This song is an extreme version of what's often at play in our lives: We place so much emphasis on ourselves! Yet a focus on human potential and promise can lead us into two ditches in this journey of life. One ditch is the anxiety that comes when we feel everything depends upon us. We better live up to our potential and make things happen. The other ditch is despair when we see how messed up we humans are and think that there is absolutely no hope.

Thanks be to God, it isn't all up to us. Life and goodness and change and possibility and newness do not depend upon us. **Our hope is not in our own promise. Our hope is in the God of promise who brings new life when all looks bleak and barren and hopeless:**

God brings new creation and order out of chaos;

God gives life to all that is dead;

God orients us to hope when all looks bleak.

God changes everything for Abram and Sarai. Eventually, even their names are changed to Abraham and Sarah to indicate that they will be father and mother of a great nation. Their story is the stuff of legends. Yet, God is always at work, sometimes in less dramatic ways, to bring new life and hope to us, to you.

God is at work when life feels chaotic and you are reminded, God is God, I am not, I can rest.

God is at work when you are assured: *In the name of Jesus your sins are forgiven* and then can let go of the shame you've been carrying.

God is at work when you keep on hoping and trying and working through long years of waiting, when others keep showing up for you and you keep showing up for them.

Whether you are feeling flashy or bleak, despairing or full of potentiality, God is at work in, for, and through you. You are loved, forgiven, and set free to follow God into God's promised future, a future with hope.