Lent 2B. February 25, 2024. Faith Episcopal Church, Poulsbo, WA. Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:22-30; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38.

The Gospel

Then [Jesus] began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. [32]He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. [33]But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'
34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. [35]For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. [36]For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? [37]Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?[38]Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'

The Sermon

Some of you may have sung the children's song, "Father Abraham had many sons – and many sons had Father Abraham. I am one of them and so are you, so let's all praise the Lord, stand up, sit down," etc. etc.

It gave kids a chance to get the energy out. But it also taught little Christian kids that we ARE all sons and daughters of Abraham and his wife Sarah. Jews, Muslims and Christians all call Abraham Father, all read the story we heard this morning about how God promised a child to Abraham and Sarah <u>in their old age</u> and how Abraham had fathered the child Ishmael with Sarah's maid Hagar.

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St. Paul knew this story. In his letter to the early church in Rome, he describes Abraham as "hoping against hope." (Romans 4:18)

"Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become the 'father of many nations' according to what was said, 'So numerous shall your descendants be.'" Paul calls Abraham's old body "already as good as dead" and Sarah's womb barren. They needed a LOT of hope!

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Yesterday I attended a zoom call with about 40 colleagues across the U.S. Two young Palestinian pastors who serve churches in East Jerusalem and in Ramallah, in the West Bank, spoke. A married couple, Rodny (Said) and Sally (Azar), about 30 years old, shared some of the hardships of the current wartime situation they and their churches are enduring. I am sure that many rabbis, imams, and people of good will share similar frustrations and sorrows.

Rev. Rodny's church is about 7 or 8 miles from his home in East Jerusalem, but it takes two to three hours to travel there because of checkpoints which have long lines and long wait times. He admitted that sometimes he has trouble believing his own words of hope when he preaches to his people on Sunday mornings.

His wife, Rev. Sally, confessed to "speechless moments" when she would like to preach confidently of hope. When she walks through the streets of East Jerusalem, she does not speak Arabic and does not show her clerical collar – out of fear. One day she and a friend decided to count how many people they saw carrying guns. In the course of one hour they counted 120. One never walks with one's hands in one's pockets or even near one's pockets, she said.

The youth in her church are particularly troubled. They miss seeing their friends. They ask her, "Is this the end of the world?" and "What did we do to deserve this?"

I do not tell you this for any political reason. No one disputes that the attack by Hamas was anything but horrible and tragic. No one disputes that the death of 30,000 Palestinians is also tragic. This is not a sermon about politics. It is a sermon about HOPE and FAITH and PRAYER.

The situation I have described is hard for us to imagine. It's extreme. And extremely difficult.

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In today's Gospel, Jesus talks of his impending suffering and death. This was also extreme and existentially threatening. It is something the people in Israel and Palestine are facing; it is something we all face. We may go through times when it is hard to hope for rescue or for anything healing in our lives. Ultimately, as we were reminded on Ash Wednesday, "You are dust and to dust you shall return."

When Peter tells Jesus he doesn't want to hear Jesus talk about death, Jesus tells Peter he is setting his mind on human things, not on divine things. Jesus will take

up his cross and he invites us to follow. What it means to follow is for each of us an individual act of faith.

Rev. Rodny stated yesterday – I admire his honesty – that about 300 of 365 days a year he wakes up wanting desperately to leave and return to Canada where he studied as a young person. Rev. Sally spoke hopelessly of political solutions.

Yet both of them – like Abraham, Sarah, and like Jesus, and like countless followers of Jesus – manage to take up the cross, keep on keeping on, and doing the work to which they are called. Rev. Rodny stated that his faith sustains him. He believes he is called to the work he is doing. Talking with his friends helps a lot, he says, even if it's complaining about three-hour waits at checkpoints, missed meetings, and feeling forgotten by the world. Friends encourage one another. Rev. Sally says her congregation members inspire her to keep on with her work, and she said she knows that people across the world – and that includes us right here in Poulsbo – are praying for them.

Rev. Rodny asks our prayers for the people for whom every hour is a struggle to stay alive. And to pray for the spiritual leaders and for all who work for peace. He says his walking and driving hours have become times of constant prayer. He walks and prays, he drives and prays, he gives thanks when he makes it through a check point and when he arrives home safely at night.

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Jesus sustained himself with prayer – often early in the morning—and in the night in which he was betrayed. We are told that praying in the garden before his arrest caused him to sweat blood in his extreme anguish.

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So, my dear friends, we are called this Lent – and always – to pray without ceasing, to be mindful of the suffering of others and to pick up our cross, whatever it might be, and to follow Jesus. We may be tempted to lose hope when we consider all the challenges of the world, of our workplaces, of our individual lives. But, I must say, for me, the witness of the two young pastors gives me hope. The example of Abraham and Sarah gives me hope. The Holy Spirit gives me hope.

Abraham did indeed become the father of many nations and religions: Judaism, Islam and Christianity. That makes us brothers and sisters one of another. Sarah did indeed have a baby: Isaac. Peter and the other disciples did indeed pick up their crosses and follow their Lord. Jesus did indeed die and was raised again on Easter to remind us that there is hope for all of us. Hope in our everyday lives and hope for our ongoing life in the Divine scheme of things.

May our faith and hope be reckoned for righteousness, even as it was in Abraham's, Sarah's, Paul's, and in the lives of so many of our forebears. May this be so for Jesus' sake and for the sake of the world which needs our peace-making, our acts of kindness, our prayers and our words of hope. Amen.