

The second Sunday in Lent – a time for reflection, repentance, and contemplation. We're all familiar with that. It is, by its very nature a more solemn and subdued time. We even find our music sometimes takes on more minor tones. I wonder, then, if you would also think of Lent as a time for praise? That may initially strike you as an odd thought, but we have much to praise God for, even in the midst of our pandemic Lent. Our texts this morning help show us more about this.

In our gospel text this morning, we encounter Jesus foretelling his death and resurrection. It's a difficult thing for his disciples to hear, naturally. But it's part of what must happen for God to keep God's promises to the world. And in this case, it involves Jesus' followers taking up their cross and following. To take up your cross and follow means to give up your sense of being part of a particular group or family and any advantages that you may have because of that affiliation, and becoming part of a new community, an new family and new sense of belonging. You belong to the family of followers of Christ. Dr. Joy Moore from Luther Seminary says that what will be new in the family Jesus invites us to is actually a recovery of the family we were meant to be as children of God. The promise made to Abraham and Sarah is made for **all** of humanity, and this will be that new family.

Speaking of Abraham and Sarah (also known as Abram and Sarai,) our Genesis text teems with God's promises. God makes a covenant, the ultimate promise, with Abram to make of him a multitude of nations. Generation upon generation shall come from him. This is followed by the pronouncement by God that Sarai will bear a son of Abraham and she will be blessed. This is a significant promise! Incidentally, think about this: Abraham already had a son, Ishmael, from Hagar. He had a "lineage" so to speak, to follow him. Sarah didn't. This promise being made isn't just for Abraham, it's for Sarah. She is the one who will be the mother of this people that will continue in perpetuity.

Our consideration of God's promises continues in our text from Romans. Paul tells us that Abraham had faith and believed that God would keep the promise that was made. God helped Abraham's faith grow stronger. He trusted that, in spite of the things that seemed like obstacles (his advanced age, for example, or Sarah's barrenness,) God would come through. That trust comes with hope. I love what we hear in verse 18 "Hoping against hope, he believed..." Don't we often find ourselves hoping against hope in our own lives?

In our Psalm today, the psalmist glorifies God for the ways in which God cares for all of God's people. When you take a closer look at this psalm, you get a sense of how many groups and peoples praise God. Who praises God? Dr. Rolf Jacobsen, also of Luther Seminary, lists it out like this:

- You who fear the Lord
- All offspring of Jacob
- All offspring of Israel
- The great congregation
- Those who seek the Lord
- All the ends of the earth
- All the families of the nations
- All who sleep in the earth
- All who go down to the dust
- Posterity
- Future generations
- A people yet unborn

That's everyone! Not just the living, but the dead and those yet unborn. EVERYONE praises God. Is it always easy to praise God? No. Some days, it feels like lamenting is all we can do. And, of course, there are plenty of psalms that offer us that opportunity, too. Dr. Jacobsen also says that we don't sing these songs of praise because they say what we already mean. Rather, as we sing them, we come to mean what they say. When we praise God, we are changed. What is it that we praise God for? Among other things, we praise God for covenants made and promises kept, for love, and for steadfastness.

It's Lent, though. And we are still in a pandemic. We can't praise God the way we want to, the way we did in the "before times." We want to sing our favorite hymns out loud together. We want to join one another for worship in person. But in this in-between season of Lent, between the before times and what is yet to come, we praise God in whatever contexts we find ourselves. In our rooms, in our homes, with family or on our own. We hold on to the promise that we will be able to gather again soon. Be we still get to praise God in our own spaces. God continues to provide for us during this time.

Our hymn for today, "Lord Jesus, You Shall be My Song," is a beautiful one that speaks of God's presence with us, even in the dark and doubt of our journey. One stanza even says "Lord Jesus, I'll praise you as long as I journey; May all of my joy be a faithful reflection of you. May the earth and the sea and the sky join my song. Lord Jesus, I'll praise you as long as I journey." While we aren't singing this hymn together here, sing it at home. It is the song in our hearts.

Our faith, gifted to us from God, sustains us, and, like Abraham, we hope against hope.

Amen.

