

## God's Awesome Yes!

LECTIONARY STUDIES *for* YEAR A — X SUNDAY *of* ORDINARY TIME

Tying this week's texts together: it is possible to tie these readings together around a theme of God's Promise(s). The Genesis reading describes God's first and foundational Promise to our faith ancestors. The Psalm speaks to why we should believe that such Promises (Plans) will be fulfilled. The reading from Romans reminds us that the Promise precedes and overshadows the subsequent Law. The selections from Matthew give us examples of how the Promise was realized in the lives of several people: Matthew in his calling, a synagogue official's daughter who was raised from the dead, and a long suffering woman whose blood-disease was healed.

Genesis 12:1-9 — *God's Promise to Abram and Sarai* [There was a wonderful song when I was growing up sung by Burt Bacharach. One of the verses proclaimed, "Promises, promises, all I hear are promises, promises, I don't know how..." It asks the age old question of how we can believe in all the promises that we hear, especially when so many of those promises are betrayed. How can we believe in God's Promise, when the promises of other "authority figures," such as politicians, parents, and partners so often fail? Yes, it is from God and that should make all the difference in the world, but the very issue of promises are suspect in the eyes of many, especially when the church has betrayed God by excluding you in the past. There is a faith-degrading or even faith-killing believability issue at stake. And yet, it is upon this, and several other promises that our faith must be based. No promise, no faith-anchor; no promise, no hope.

The Bible tackles this issue up front. The Promise is made to Abram and Sarai. They did what was required of them. They went to the Promised Land, but it was already occupied and they were forced to move. The Promise they had received — at least as it was explained to them in the text, and as they no doubt understood it — was unfulfilled. The Promise was broken (in their understanding (you could say no "instant gratification" in modern terms)). The next thirteen chapters relating the Abraham and Sarah story will speak to us of the ups and downs that come along the way to that Promise's fulfillment. Propaganda does not write about such disappointments and detours, such promises broken and renegotiated — faith and history has the integrity to do so. If nothing else, the Promise is believable because the text does not try to avoid the heartaches that Abraham and Sarah and their descendents experienced along the way.

It may be useful to tell the parallel story of your calling (or some other great adventure in the faith) that has (had) similar ups and downs. A promise was given to you, you acted upon it, things did not quite happen the way you expected, you may even have walked away for awhile, or fallen into despair, but you reconnected, and you have learned that the promise given to you is believable because of the faith journey you have been on — walking with that promise. In one way, that is the equivalence of sketching the entire Abraham and Sarah story and your parallel story, but such an overview might make it easier to teach the patience that is sometimes required for promise fulfillment. {You could also use the Matthew texts as three examples of how the Promise was fulfilled, specifically, one fulfillment in the sense of even a person who betrayed the promise (at least in human cultural terms) being brought into the promise, and two who were healed because they embraced the hope that Jesus was investing in the continuing reign of the Promise originally given to Abraham and Sarah. (Yes, in Matthew's understanding, it is the same understanding, which by the Grace of God we Gentiles are being brought into through Jesus.)}

There are other interesting things going on in this passage. Perhaps for the glbti/q communities, it is the calling out of a group of people that is most important. God called the Chosen People, who were first the Hebrew people, who became the Israelites, and through Jesus

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were expanded to include Gentiles, by calling out these two people away from their family and separating them from the rest of their community, their culture, and indeed, even their old “gods.” God did this to bring clarity to the issue of faith, and to cause Humanity’s relationship with the Holy to mature and evolve in a new direction. We can make similar claims today, that God is calling forth a group of people on the basis of their sexual and gender identities to bring greater nuance and clarity, greater maturity, indeed even a closer understanding of the relationship between Humanity and the Holy. It starts by hearing God’s Voice calling us to leave the culture and the families and the politics of our past, calling us to move on so we can co-create something vitally new (like that new song of Psalm 33 below). This is the path many of us have taken. Note that God does not call every glbti/q person to take this path, just some. Why? Because that is all God needs to get the job done. Over the next few generations, we who have been called will work on consolidating new cultural and faith concepts which can be brought back over time to the rest of the community from which we were drawn. A similar thing is happening to a younger generation of queer youth who are going beyond some of the identity politics and theology we were forced to use to make sense out of our lives. In both cases, it is God calling forth a group of people whose lived experiences will, form the basis for a new (or perhaps, a broader) understanding of the faith, a faith experience which establishes, or sets in its proper place, Humanity’s understanding of the Law of Love. {Another way of saying this, is that in every generation, groups of people are called out by God to broaden the scope of the Promise’s applicability through the proof of their embracing it in their lived experiences in the faith.}

Finally, let me say one other thing. The Promise made to Abraham and Sarah, and as understood by the subsequent Hebrew, Israelite, and some modern day Jewish peoples, is (in part) a promise of a specific piece of land, a land which today, as we all too well know, has other people in it with prior physical claims to the land, an issue which has resulted in continual violence and uneasy relations with neighbors of different cultural, faith, and racial heritages. We can make an impressive argument that when Jesus invited us into this covenant, along with many of the other things he transcended or made null and void, that this issue of land is one of them. As Christians we are not promised a land, or indeed any earthly treasures and possessions other than that God will take care of us, giving us what we need to survive in a fair and equitable way. Jesus’ re-interpretation of the Promise takes it out of the material and into a spiritual way of life, from land to love, from land to a guarantee of a place in Heaven, from a security based upon land which must be defended to a security based upon loving one another as you love yourself. *These are very real differences which we must not ignore.* The Promise that God made to Abraham and Sarah still stands, but through Jesus we have learned something more about what that Promise entails. While it is fair for a Jewish person to say that the Promise does speak about a relationship with the land as part of their relationship with God, for Christians, brought in through the re-interpretation Jesus imposed upon it, it can never be about such land issues. {I realize how problematic saying something like that can sound to someone who is struggling with issues of land reform: farmers whose land has been taken away because of the ever increasing mechanization and globalization of the agricultural industry, peasants in many countries who are being forced off their land for various reasons. So caution: in these cases, a more nuanced approach is necessary. Yes, Jesus cares that they are being cheated out of their way of life and their livelihood, but Jesus cares because it is an expression of Evil being wrongly imposed upon

them, not because there is a special holiness involved with their relation to the land as a fulfillment of God's Promise to them.}]

For the text of vv. 1-3 and additional commentary, see pp. A-188/189 (II Sunday of Lent).

<sup>4</sup>So Abram and Sarai went as YHVH-God had told him, and Lot went with him. Now Abram was seventy-five years old when they left Haran. <sup>5</sup>Abram and Sarai took their nephew Lot, all the property they had collected, and all the slaves they had bought in Haran. And they set forth to go to the land of Canaan.

When they came into Canaan, <sup>6</sup>Abram and Sarai passed through the land to the holy place of Shechem, the tree of Moreh. The Canaanites were then in the land. <sup>7</sup>But YHVH-God appeared to Abram and Sarai and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So Abram and Sarai built an altar there to YHVH-God who had appeared to them.

<sup>8</sup>But Abram and Sarai were forced to move on to the mountain to the east of Bethel, pitching their tent with Bethel to the west and Ai to the east. There they built an altar to YHVH-God and cried out to YHVH-God's Name. <sup>9</sup>Then Abram and Sarai set out and journeyed by stages toward the Negev.

Psalm 33:1-12 — [We can depend upon God's Promise(s) because God is dependable (v. 4) they are based in righteousness and justice (v. 5) the height and depth of Creations are the Works of God's Will (vv. 6-7, 9) the plans of nations which might interfere with God's Plans are crushed (10) and because not just God's Plans and Promises, but God's very Thoughts are eternal (v. 11). So, does the Psalmist's paean to God play out true in Abraham and Sarah's story and in the lives of the disciples and crowds following Jesus in Matthew's Gospel? From such a "narrow" or "limited" perspective, it would seem we have no reason to say anything but "Yes" to this question. The actual participants may not have understood it at the time, but in the long view of history, God has certainly done what was required to fulfill the Promise for these faithful. And yet, it is more that God has provided the means and the incentives for the fulfillment, because we know of many faithful believers — both in yesteryear and today — whose lives have been/are destroyed or to a lesser degree messed up by Evil. Unless we are to say that Evil is in cahoots with God (the Cross says otherwise) then God's Plans can certainly be derailed. Process theology however, would say that whenever those Plans are sabotaged, that God immediately re-plans and communicates the next steps through the Holy Spirit so the believer can pick up the pieces and get going again.

I would suggest that as long as there was a Chosen People instead of all Humanity potentially being God's Chosen People through Christ that there could have been serious and legitimate questions concerning the justice of a Promise that left so many people on the outside. All in all, as favorable as God's Actions were for the Covenant People of the Promise, those Actions were at the expense of other peoples who were unjustly (at least from a human perspective) left out of God's Care (or somewhat less harshly, were marginalized from God's Care). In any case, the Psalm with its limitations can be used to reinforce the message of Genesis or Matthew.

Perhaps more intriguing though, is that all of this has led the Psalmist to ask us to sing a new song, and importantly not just a joyful "noise," but a song "skillfully" played. The depths of

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God's Actions on behalf of believers should be matched by the depths of skills the believers use in responding. And for some that presumably means keeping ones mouth shut during Singspiration! An elitist view perhaps, but those who are not as gifted in song could respond in a way that matches a song's eloquence as expressed in the gifts they have been given.

Another point of interest is the concept of adoration being harmonious to the upright. Is this saying that the very act of the faithful worshipping together can/will generate harmony? Given all the differences we embrace in MCC, I find that the harmony of services — which can often be a smorgasbord of the liturgies we brought from multiple former denominations and tossed in the proverbial salad bowl — to be a remarkable enactment of this harmony on a weekly basis. Even in churches when the leadership, the board and various members are sometimes at each others' throats, the worship service itself can be a cool, quiet, and harmonious place of refuge.]

<sup>1</sup>Sing forth to YHVH-God, O you righteous,  
for adoration is harmonious to the upright.  
<sup>2</sup>Give thanks to YHVH-God with the harp,  
sing praise to Him/Her with a lyre<sup>1</sup> —  
<sup>3</sup>Sing Him/Her a new song —  
play skillfully with a joyful shout.  
<sup>4</sup>for YHVH-God's Word is right,  
His/Her Works are faithful.  
<sup>5</sup>He/She loves righteousness and justice,  
and the Earth is full of YHVH-God's Loving-Kindness:  
<sup>6</sup>Heaven was made by YHVH-God's Word,  
by the breath of His/Her Mouth, so was Heaven's Host.  
<sup>7</sup>He/She gathers up the sea waters into a heap,<sup>2</sup>  
depositing the depths in storehouses.

<sup>8</sup>Let all the Earth revere YHVH-God,  
Let all the World's inhabitants stand in awe of Him/Her.  
<sup>9</sup>For He/She spoke and it became;  
He/She commanded and it stood firm.  
<sup>10</sup>YHVH-God crushes the plans of nations;  
He/She frustrates the peoples' plots,  
<sup>11</sup>but YHVH-God's Plans endure forever;  
the thoughts of His/Her Heart, for ages without end.  
<sup>12</sup>Blessed is the nation whose deity is YHVH-God,  
the people He/She has chosen to be His/Her Own.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Actually a ten string instrument.

<sup>2</sup> Some translations mirror "storehouse" in the second clause with "bottle" (NRSV) or "jar" (NIV) here. The NAB reads "bowl" and footnotes that the "ancients sometimes attributed the power keeping the seas from overwhelming land to a primordial victory of the storm-god over a personified Sea. God confines the seas as easily as one puts water in a bowl. The NJB suggests an allusion to the parting of the waters in the Red/Reed Sea incident as described in Exodus 15:8.

<sup>3</sup> Alternatively, "possession" or "inheritance."

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Romans 4:13-25 — *We Are Not Justified by Obedience to the Law* [This text takes the issue of believability of the Promise one step further. There are promises we receive which are unbelievable because of our perception of who we are. Here the issue is Abraham & Sarah's age. They were too old to experience natural childbirth, but God's Promise was greater than their age (and for all you adherents of the so called "natural law" of nature itself). Similarly, how many times have we said, "I'm too old," or "I'm too young," or "I'm too weak," or "That's too small, I have more important things to do," or, "I don't have the skills," or "I don't or can't \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank)..." We do not do it because we do not believe we are able, and if the One making the promise is the One we believe is God, then we are also saying that our faith is not able. Paul and the Genesis texts he is quoting are telling us that even though we are too weak or unknowing, God is strong enough to make us strong, and wise enough to give us the wisdom we need for any task given to us to do in the faith arena.

Paul is also wrestling with the issue of "Who is included in the Promise?" The original Promise was soon embraced within the concept of circumcision and the granting of the Mosaic Law, but, the Promise preceded the Law and the covenant of circumcision. The Early Christian Communities had to solve the problem of what was the proper relationship between a Christian who did not come from these cultural roots and those who embraced as part of their heritage both circumcision and the Law. Paul's response is that what occurred through Jesus in bringing these Gentiles into the Christian faith transcended those earlier covenant markers. He does this by making two claims: one, that Abraham and Sarah's belief was based in their faith, in their believing beyond the boundaries of belief, believing that although they were beyond the age of childbearing that they still could have children. He is asking us to believe beyond belief and cultural norms that we also can be heirs of the Promise. This is especially important for the glbti/q communities because we have been indoctrinated by our many churches of origin and by culture/politics to believe that we are outside the promises of faith and civic life. Paul is telling us to listen to God's Voice and not to culture's and to have faith, to believe beyond believability (in human terms) that the Promise belongs to us as well.

The other and seemingly simpler claim can be somewhat problematic. Paul claims that when this Promise was given to Abraham and Sarah, that the Promise was independent of and prior to the Law. If you follow a strict time scheme of interpretation, one event in faith history following another, then that understanding will work. If though, you believe as John does, that everything came to be through Jesus Christ's Agency, then the Law, the covenant of circumcision, and the Promise are all irrevocably linked, and any time scheme has been collapsed by their origin in Christ's Agency. Paul's argument necessarily fails (at least in terms of logic!) if you follow John's idea of Christ's Agency. You could get around this logic problem if you make the claim that it is Humanity's understanding of God's Program that has evolved and matured through the giving of the Promise to a covenant based upon circumcision to the collation and blessing of a Law to the more inclusive and radical understanding of the Holy through our experience of the Living Christ. The time scheme is unified on the divine level, but evolving with one event following another on the human level.]

For the text of vv. 13-17 and additional commentary, see pp. A-189/191 (II Sunday of Lent).

<sup>18</sup>Beyond all hope they believed, so that they might become parents to many nations, according

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to what had been spoken {*Genesis 15:5*} “So shall your descendents be.”<sup>19</sup> And being not weak in faith, they considered not his own body as good as dead, being about one hundred years old, nor the deadness of Sarah’s womb.<sup>20</sup> Yet no disbelief caused them to doubt God’s Promise, rather their faith was strengthened, and they were giving glory to God,<sup>21</sup> because they were fully persuaded that God could do what He/She had promised.<sup>22</sup> This is why, “it was reckoned to them as righteousness.”<sup>24</sup> <sup>23</sup> Now it was not written for their sake alone that it was reckoned to them,<sup>24</sup> but for our sake as well, to whom it is about to be reckoned — to those believing on the One who raised up our Savior Jesus from the dead,<sup>25</sup> who was delivered over to that death for our trespasses, and who was raised up for our justification.

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26 [The most direct tie-in with the discussions of the preceding texts is in v. 22 when Jesus tells the woman that her faith has healed her. In the context of the preceding, one could legitimately substitute “belief” for “faith,” to wit, your belief has made you whole, has allowed you to embrace the Promise God has for you, and has allowed you to understand that being glbti/q (or \_\_\_\_\_) and Christian is possible.

Jesus accomplishes this on the “micro” or more personal level by repeating the Promise given to Abraham and Sarah in his command to Matthew to “follow me.” Follow me is an invitation, but it is a promise because of who is saying it. It is also an unspecified promise, and rightly so, because the entire range of possibilities that being divine entails backs this invitation. All that Matthew knows at this point, is that the one who is calling him is special: a gifted preacher, teacher, and healer. He may or may not have thought of him as the Messiah at this point (certainly that is not understood to be the case by the disciples for another seven chapters of the story). It is Matthew’s faith in this invitation, this promise, with all its unknowns that he acts upon. The story invites us to embrace the invitation and the promises that God has for us *before* we know all the details. In truth, we may not even be able to understand the details until we have lived into the promise / invitation long enough to understand what it is all about.

But there is something else here as well that takes this issue of promise and invitation to a whole new level. Abraham and Sarah were not given a promise of being healed, only that they would have children. Here Jesus is saying that the result of belief — the results of believing the promise or of accepting the invitation — are healing, even to the point of being raised from the dead. We see this so often in the glbti/q communities when we see a person’s belief about themselves as a glbti/q person transform their pain into wholeness, their haunted sadness and internalized homophobia into joy, etc. This is analogous to the woman who has been bleeding for so many long years — so many of us bled for years from our own disbelief about the faithfulness of who God made us; from our fears of the consequences of how God made us. And just like the woman who believed (against the standards and understandings of her community) that it was enough just to touch Jesus with the small measure of faith she possessed, so it has been enough for us to offer even the smallest hope that who we are is blessed by God to Jesus to see it multiplied many times over, resulting in the healing of our doubts and fears. We are reborn into a new life. Metaphorically we have been raised up from the deadness of our old way of life and its fears and false understandings into a new way of life embracing the truth of who we are and our good relationship to God.]

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<sup>4</sup> Paul is quoting his own Romans 4:3 which quotes I Maccabees 2:51.

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*Matthew's Call and Jesus' Eating with Those Not Acknowledging Their Failures*  
*Parallels: Mark 2:13-17 (Luke 5:27-32)*

<sup>9</sup>As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth, and Jesus said to Matthew, "Follow me!"

And Matthew got up and followed Jesus.

<sup>10</sup>While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's home — look! — many tax collectors and those who had not acknowledged their failures were coming and joining Jesus and the disciples at table.

<sup>11</sup>When the Pharisees saw this, they asked the disciples, "Why is your Teacher eating with tax collectors and those who have not acknowledged their failures?"

<sup>12</sup>But Jesus overheard them and said, "Those who are whole have no need for a physician; only those who suffer illnesses. <sup>13</sup>But go and learn what this means {Hosea 6:6} 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but those who have not acknowledged their failures."

*Raising a Girl from the Dead and Healing a Woman*  
*Parallels: Mark 5:21-43 (Luke 8:40-56)*

<sup>18</sup>While Jesus was speaking these things, a Synagogue<sup>5</sup> Official came and knelt before him saying, "My daughter has just now died. But come, lay your hands on her and she will live."

<sup>19</sup>So Jesus got up and went with the Synagogue Official, and so did the disciples.

<sup>20</sup>But suddenly, a woman, suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years, came up behind Jesus and touched the tassels of his garment. <sup>21</sup>For she was saying to herself, "If I only touch the tassels of Jesus' garment, I shall be healed."

<sup>22</sup>Jesus turned, and seeing her said, "Daughter, Do not be afraid! Your faith has healed you!"

And she was healed that very moment.

<sup>23</sup>When Jesus entered the Synagogue Official's home, Jesus saw the flute players and a noisy disordered crowd. <sup>24</sup>"Get out!" Jesus ordered. "The young woman has not died, she is only sleeping."

But they laughed at Jesus.

<sup>25</sup>After the crowd was driven out, Jesus went in, took her hand, and she was raised up.

<sup>26</sup>Afterward, news of this spread throughout that region.

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<sup>5</sup> This word is not in the Greek text, but the story is sited in the same location as Mark's, and this is most likely Jairus, hence a Synagogue Leader/Official.