

FIRST LESSON: Genesis 17:1-7; 15-16
SECOND LESSON: Romans 4:13-25
February 28, 2021
SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

“The Second Covenant”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

One of the things that always frustrated me listening to ministers over the years was the fact that many of my most basic questions were NEVER answered. In fact, they were completely ignored. As a pastor I know that there is a reason for this. Because congregations generally have a lot of biblical literalists in the mix who get highly and loudly offended, pastors tend to skip over the controversial or challenging bits. I still remember the storm that kicked up years ago when I suggested that it was “possible” to interpret the story of Adam and Eve as an allegory, while allowing that it was also perfectly acceptable to take it literally. One member resigned from the choir and the church and never came back. Clearly, I was a heretic.

So here is some more “heresy.” Was Abraham really 99 when these events took place? Was he really 100 when Isaac was born? Did he really live to be 175? And what about all those people before the flood who allegedly lived hundreds of years? The answer is actually complicated. But putting it right out there today I am going to very bluntly say, no. They did not really live that long.

The ancient world used numbers in two ways. They used them literally, as we do. $2 + 2 = 4$. But they also used them to mean something else. Many of the numbers we see in the Old Testament are either symbolic numbers or sacred numbers. Symbolic numbers can be added up or used in combination. Sacred numbers just are what they are. And the matter is further complicated by the fact that it appears that more than one system of numerology is at work in the Old Testament. It is a blend of ancient Chaldean, Babylonian and Mesopotamian systems. The numbers 0, 5, 2 and 7 appear to be symbolic. The number 60 was also very important and we still use it today. There are 60 minutes in an hour and 60 seconds in a minute. The Hebrew people favored the numbers 3, 7, 12 and 40. These were sacred numbers. Jonah was in the whale for 3 days and 3 nights. Christ was in the tomb for 3 days. There are 7 days in a week, and 7 churches in Revelation, 12 tribes, 12 apostles, and 40 turns up everywhere. The original meanings of these numbers and number combinations have been lost in the mists of time. In fact, they were lost long before the New Testament was written

So, was Abraham 75 when God first called him and he left Haran? No. That’s a combination of two symbolic numbers. Did he live to be 175? No. That’s a combination of 75 and 100, also a symbolic number. Was he 99 when this event took place? No. That’s 3, 3s, doubled. We no longer know what the

meanings are. But knowing that the ages given are not accurate makes a lot of sense when we look at the stories as a whole, because twice before the story we read this morning Abraham passed Sarah off as his sister because she was so beautiful he didn't want someone to kill him in order to get her. With all due deference to the beauty of older women, I don't think they would have been lusting after a woman in her 60s or 70s. So, let's look at this story right sized, and see what we make of it.

The covenant of Noah was the first covenant God made with creation. The covenant of Abraham is the second. There are things in common to both. In both, God initiates the covenant. In both, humanity is granted favor and grace. And in both, there is a sign given to remember the agreement that has been made. For Noah it was the rainbow. For Abraham, it was a much more personal and costly sign—circumcision.

Abraham's story begins much earlier. He was called Abram when God called him to leave all that was familiar and go to a new land that God would show him. He left Haran 24 years earlier. Of course, we arrive at that number by subtracting 75 from 99, but assuming that number is literal, which it may or may not be, let's imagine Abram was 25 when he left, which would make him 49 here. That would have made Sarah 15 when they left and 39 here. They would have been trying to have children for 24 years. Now she's almost 40. No wonder they gave up. Thirteen years earlier she gave her servant girl Hagar to Abraham to have a child through her. They had no understanding of genetics. Women only provided the nurturing environment to grow a child. The child arrived in complete form in the sperm. Using her maid in order to have a child would have been like using a genetically unrelated surrogate today.

Somehow when we adjust the numbers closer to reality the story itself becomes more relatable. How many couples have struggled with infertility for years? And in a culture that values women according to their childbearing ability, how devastating this would have been for Sarah! Needless to say, the problem was always assumed to lie with the woman. But on this day God appeared to Abraham, then known as Abram, and told him that he would be the father of many nations, and that his name would now be Abraham. By the standards of the time, and even today, Abraham was old to become a new dad. But God said, "I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you." Then God went on to say that Abraham's wife was the one through whom this would happen, and that her name was to be changed from Sarai to Sarah. Abraham's initial response to this? We're told, "Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, 'Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?' And Abraham said to God, 'If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!'"

The story still works if Abraham was 50 and Sarah was 40. She would be on the verge of menopause and he would be well past the age of most fathers of infants, every bit the patriarch with long grey hair and a beard. And God did assure Abraham that Ishmael, who according to tradition was the father of the Arab nations, would prosper.

Abraham believed God. How do we know he believed God? Because he did what God told him to do. "On that very day Abraham took his son Ishmael and all those born in his household or bought with his money, every male in

his household, and circumcised them.” And I’m sure all the men in the congregation hearing these words are now cringing in sympathetic pain. But it is important for us to note that Abraham acted BEFORE Isaac was conceived. He trusted God. He demonstrated that trust in action.

What God required of Abraham, aside from circumcision, was that he “walk before God faithfully and be blameless.” Fortunately for us, this does not mean that God required perfection. To “walk before” is literally “walk before my face” in Hebrew. It means to show the kind of subservience one would show a king. It means to always be conscious of God’s presence, and like a sunflower moves to follow the sun, to adjust our position in regard to God, always putting God first. To “be blameless” does not actually mean sinless. Noah was called blameless and he certainly was not sinless. None of the great heroes of the Old Testament were without sin. The standard is pure devotion towards God, not moral perfection. And God offered two rewards in exchange—a covenant and numerous descendants. Abram’s new name, Abraham, means father of nations. And Sarah will be the mother of nations and kings. In singling out and including Sarah God was making a statement that went against the patriarchy of the time. Abraham and Sarah are co-heirs of this promise. They may not have understood genetics, but God did.

Paul writes in Romans, “Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations.” Abraham believed God. Abraham trusted God. It was that trust that set him apart, and the second covenant is all about trust. The covenant of Noah required nothing of us. It was unilateral. The covenant of Abraham does not ask for our perfection, **but it does ask for our devotion.** God’s covenant with Abraham demonstrates that even when things look impossible, God keeps God’s promises. Amen.

Genesis 17:1-7; 15-18

17 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. **2** Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.” **3** Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, **4** “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. **5** No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. **6** I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. **7** I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. **15** God also said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. **16** I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.” **17** Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, “Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?” **18** And Abraham said to God, “If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!”

Romans 4:13-25

13 It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. **14** For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless,**15** because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.

16 Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. **17** As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations."^[a] He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.

18 Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be."^[b] **19** Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead.**20** Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, **21** being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. **22** This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness." **23** The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone,**24** but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. **25** He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.