

A life that matters (*Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Mark 8:31-38; Lent 2B*)

In this week's readings, God's covenant-making continues.

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Last Sunday, we read of God's covenant with Noah and the rest of creation, symbolized by a "bow in the clouds."

Today, God's covenant-making continues. Noah is long gone, and there is a new recipient: Abram.

There are many passages in Genesis that describe the covenant between these two parties, and in each case the terms are graciously lopsided. We see again and again that a covenant is different from a contract. God promises to make Abram's name great, pledges the gift of a homeland, and vows to make him the father of a great nation.

Like Noah, Abram doesn't say much. But he does respond to God's covenant in some important ways:

Abram listens. Unlike other biblical characters whom God addresses, Abram does not run the other way. He does not come up with excuses as to why he's unsuitable for the task. Yes, he does laugh with disbelief at the whole thing, though we can hardly blame a 99-year-old man for finding God's words amusing.

He receives a new name. Here God renames Abram, which means "exalted ancestor." He is now Abraham, "ancestor of a multitude." In this renaming, God

inaugurates a future for Abraham that's more consequential than he ever could have imagined.

He bows before God. "Abram fell on his face." The hymn says it well: "To God be the glory; great things [God] has done." The first faithful response to God's covenant is gratitude and praise.

I suspect that, like Mary so many centuries later, Abraham ponders these things in his heart. The journey is not easy, and yet Abraham's faith remains steadfast. The covenant becomes his touchstone.

The Gospel lesson provides both comparison and contrast to Abram's encounter. In his own way, Jesus is laying down the terms of the agreement, but Peter doesn't listen quietly or fall down prostrate before Jesus. Instead, he contends with the implications of a life spent following God. He may wish he'd held his tongue, because what he gets is a bracing accounting of the costs of discipleship, punctuated by tough rhetorical questions.

"For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?" Genesis doesn't do much to account for the cost to Abram of embracing the covenant, though a name change certainly hints toward this.

I find myself both repelled and attracted by these encounters. Repelled because I know the challenging road ahead for Abram, Peter, and Jesus, and I'd rather avoid it. As Flannery O'Connor wrote, "All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful." Yet I'm also attracted to it, because what these stories lift up is the vision of a consequential life, a life that deeply matters.

I recently heard an interview with David Kessler, who worked with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross on her stages of grief. Kessler recently suffered the loss of his own son, and he has identified a sixth vital stage: meaning making.

He remembered a night shortly after his son's death: "I'm sitting out in my office; lectures are canceled; everything's over, in my mind anyway," he told Brene Brown. "And I run across these chapters [I'd written some time ago] on meaning. And I held them up and I went, 'Yeah, like that's going to help.' And I threw them down. And then a couple of weeks later, I saw them again and I started reading them, and I was

shocked—the idea of meaning did not take away my pain, but it gave me a cushion that I had not noticed before.”

This adulterous and sinful generation. Tough but fair, Jesus. What can possibly cushion us amid that harsh truth? Knowing that God’s covenant endures forever; knowing there’s no gain to be found in living a small, cowardly, self-focused life; knowing that when we lose our life, we can save it.