

Journeys of Love: Upside Down
Genesis 17:1-7 and 15-16 and Mark 8:31-38
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota
February 25, 2018
Rev. Glen Bell

2 + 2 = 4?

A, then B, then C?

Work hard, and good things will happen?

The most important parts of life are success, contentment, relief from pain?

We know what we see. We know what we see and hear at this hinge moment sixty-two days after Christmas and thirty-five days before Easter. These days of Lent, we see and hear all sorts of things. We see athletes at the pinnacle of their sport, standing on the Olympic podium. We see government and campaign officials pleading guilty to crimes and misdemeanors. We hear the cries of the classmates of those murdered at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School.

What do we learn? That dedicated effort leads to triumph? That might makes right? That safety and security are the biggest values of all? Is that it?

This morning you and I learn there are principles and morals far more important than safety and security. We learn God's love is deep and strong and true.

We learn God's presence and work is so often not what we expect.

Sometimes the foundation of our lives is revealed in symbol. Sometimes we recognize what is core, what is central, in the demonstration of hidden realities. We need to look very hard. We need to listen very closely.

Mark Husbands is a professor of theology at Hope College. As we listen to Genesis this morning, he points out that "God binds the divine self to the history and well-being of Abraham [and Sarah and all their children]," that this hinge moment in the life of God's people comes "not from philosophical reflection on God's being, but from the personal experience of God's presence and faithfulness." That's right. We encounter God's faithfulness and we discover faith, trust as the key to our lives.

That's exactly what happens here in this story. God doesn't come with a dictum or dogma. God doesn't show up with an explanation or rationale. God appears to Abram with a promise, with a crazy, shaky, risky, unexpected promise. Not one Abram knows. Not one Abram hears. Not one Abram sees coming.

It is a crazy promise. The foundation, the hidden reality is this: I covenant to be your God forever. Through you and your children, I will bless all the nations of the earth. All people are cherished, blessed, loved through you by my powerful and amazing grace.

This promise is so central, so core, so foundational that its revelation, its demonstration is just as crazy and unexpected. Remember: Abraham was old, very old. Sarah was old, very old. They were unable to have children together. But in these ten short verses, we hear this over and over again. "I will make you exceedingly numerous," "You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations," "I will make you exceedingly fruitful," "I will make nations of you," "Your offspring after you [shall know my covenant] throughout their generations," "I will give you a son by Sarah," "She shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

If God were a used car salesman, we would move away in the opposite direction.

But that's exactly what happens. The impossible becomes real. Faith and hope and love are revealed as the foundation of our lives through this crazy promise.

On her journey through Wonderland, Alice (in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*) meets with all kinds of unexpected experiences and strange new friends. Alice encounters the White Queen who lives in reverse order and remembers things before they occur. Her age, she tells Alice is "a hundred and one, five months and a day."

“I can’t believe that!” says Alice.

“Can’t you?” the Queen replies in a pitying tone. ‘Try again: draw a long breath and shut your eyes.’

“Alice laughs. ‘There’s no use trying,’ she says. ‘One can’t believe impossible things.’

“I daresay you haven’t had much practice,’ responds the Queen. ‘When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why sometimes I have believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast!’”

Faith and hope and love enable us to believe the impossible, to trust God’s goodness.

God’s presence and work is so often not what we expect. Sometimes the foundation of our lives is revealed in symbol. Sometimes we recognize what is core, what is central, in the demonstration of hidden realities. We need to look very hard to see God’s covenant. We need to listen very closely to discern God’s call.

You and I all too easily focus on gold medals. You and I all too quickly conclude that in this real world, might makes right. You and I are too often tempted to throw up our hands at the cries of the children, to turn away, to turn off the television, to pull the covers up over our heads.

But God’s presence and work is so often in the unexpected.

The apostle Peter is pretty sure he has come to a gold medal moment. He and the others have followed Jesus all over Galilee. They have watched and witnessed as he healed the sick and troubled, told the truth through parables, fed thousands with just a few bits of food, and walked on water. Just a moment before today’s scripture, the excitement has reached a fever pitch. Jesus has pulled the disciples aside, and he puts it to them plainly: Who do you say that I am? Who do you say that I am?

In that ultimate moment, the others are silent, but Peter hits the nail on the head. You are the Christ! You are the Messiah! Then, right then, I expect Peter feels like he has snowboarded the halfpipe to perfection or skated flawlessly through his entire program. He is right, and he is ready for his medal!

He is right, you know. Peter has given up everything to follow Jesus. He has followed Jesus everywhere. He wants his dedicated effort to lead to triumph.

And right then Jesus says: I must suffer and be rejected and killed. And you, you must pick up your cross and lose your life for my sake.

This is a radical moment in the Scriptures. Peter simply can’t believe it, can’t believe that God’s Son could and would reduce himself to servant, humble servant. He takes Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him. Think about it: Peter takes Jesus, the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God, and *begins to rebuke him*.

I get it. As crazy as it seems for Peter to rebuke Jesus, it is no crazier than Jesus’ announcement that he will lose his life for us and that we will lose our lives for him.

This isn’t at all what we expected. No, we think $2 + 2 = 4$, and *A* leads to *B* leads to *C*. We expect a different Jesus. We want a different Jesus. We want a Jesus who will bless us with good things, not this crazy Jesus who calls us to a cross.

If you step over to our sanctuary and look up at the south wall, you will see the Jesus we hope for. He is there, at table with his disciples and preaching the Good News to the crowds. He looks . . . well, calm.

That’s the Jesus we want – calm, collected, reasonable. That’s the Jesus we want – protecting and rescuing the children, punishing the guilty (that is, our enemies), and passing out medals to us, guaranteeing success, contentment, relief from pain.

But we learn God’s presence and work is so often not what we expect.

Sometimes the foundation of our lives is revealed in symbol. Sometimes we recognize what is core, what is central, in the demonstration of hidden realities. We need to look very hard. We need to listen very closely.

Jouette Bassler taught New Testament at Perkins School of Theology. She sums it all up. Here Jesus, the Son of Man, is given “dominion and kingship over all peoples.” Yet he demonstrates and teaches us that human purpose is discovered “in removing oneself from the center of one’s concerns, relinquishing status and power in favor of service to others.”

We come to this as a surprise, as a discovery, an unexpected blessing. We come to this when the moment seems far gone, through a crazy promise that we gain everything when we give it all away. So it was for Frederick Buechner, the Christian writer, novelist, poet and Presbyterian pastor. My friend Lewis Galloway describes the moment this way.

“Buechner was in his late twenties when he gave up teaching and moved to New York to become a professional writer. He already had published two novels, the first quite successful and the second one not successful. After his move, he found he could not write a word. He thought about going into advertising or even the CIA. He described his life as something between a farce and a pilgrimage. He was restless, at loose ends, lost.

“He started going to Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church where he heard the great preacher George Buttrick. It was a chance phrase in one of Buttrick’s sermons that caught his attention so that Jesus might catch his life. Buechner writes of his experience that ultimately led him to faith in Christ.

“What I found was what I had already half seen, or less than half, in many places over my twenty-seven years without ever knowing what it was that I was seeing or even that I was seeing anything of great importance. . . . I am left with no other way of saying it than that what I found finally was Christ. Or was found. It hardly seems to matter which. There are other words for describing what happened to me – psychological words, historical words, poetic words – but in honesty as well as faith, I am reduced to the word that is his name, because no other seems to account for the experience so fully.”

In Christ God comes for us. God comes alongside us. God turns our world upside down. We discover God’s love is deep and strong and true. But we also learn God’s love is not what we expect, becoming real through a crazy promise, a crucifying cross, something at first only half seen, half heard, half accepted.

Jesus Christ has turned the world upside down. So in your journeys of love, look and listen for God’s presence. Trust the crazy promise. Expect the unexpected. And give yourself away, to the glory of God in Christ.