

HOPING AGAINST HOPE

GENESIS 17:1-7; ROMANS 4:13-25
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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As I mentioned last Sunday, our Scriptures throughout the season of Lent will be connected to the theme of “covenant.”

On this second Sunday of Lent our readings lead us to an encounter with the massive biblical figure of Abraham and the covenant God makes with him.

Abraham, the patriarch of the people of Israel, the inheritor of God’s promise to bless him with descendants beyond number.

Abraham, the one who Jews, Christians, and Muslims trace their lineage back to.

Abraham, the one whose faith, Paul says in Romans, “was reckoned to him as righteousness.”

Where to begin? Well, very often when I’m reflecting on the passage or passages of the week in preparation for a sermon, a simple word or phrase will grab my attention.

This week, it was three words from Romans 4:

Hoping against hope.

Even when God’s promise seemed slow in arriving, Paul says Abraham was “hoping against hope.”

What an interesting phrase. Naturally, I began by Googling it:

- To hope or wish for **with little reason or justification**, as in I'm hoping against hope that someone will return my wallet.
- To continue to hope for something **even though it seems unlikely** to happen.
- To have hope even when the situation **appears to be hopeless**.
- To continue to hope for something, even if this **seems useless or foolish**.

This doesn't *sound* very admirable.

Is "hoping against hope" just a fancy way of talking about naïveté? Or even worse, is it just a stubborn unwillingness to accept reality and continue living in fantasyland?

How should we think about this expression, "hoping against hope?"

Well as a pastor, I have a whole file full of stories, either written down or just kind of lodged in my memory—stories and people that illustrate this idea of "hoping against hope."

This week, my thoughts returned to a pretty ordinary February Sunday almost exactly three years ago.

It was about 12:30, right after our worship service here, when a guy showed up looking for a pastor to talk to.

He was probably in his mid-thirties, lean, tough looking. He had tattoos running up both sides of his neck.

"Hey pastor," he said, pumping my hand enthusiastically, "I'm Tyler... Tryin' to get myself back to Nova Scotia... I been out here in Alberta looking for work, but I haven't had no luck... I got a little girl, she's two... her mom ain't in the picture anymore... I thought if I came out west with some work boots and a clean drug test, I'd get a job no problem, but I been out here for a few months and got nothin'... I'm just tryin' to get back to the Trans Canada to maybe find a ride... Do you think anyone would be able to give me a ride a few miles east? I got no money, but you know I believe in God... I was baptized a while back... I'm on the right side, that's for sure... You know, I just need to get back to Nova Scotia... I miss my home so much..."

The words kept tumbling out of his mouth.

“I’ll tell you what, Tyler,” I said, “I live about fifteen minutes east of here. I can give you a ride as far as I’m going. It’s not much, but it will get you a bit closer to where you’re trying to go.”

He smiled widely. “Oh pastor, that would be great, man.” He grabbed his black gym bag, and we headed out.

Over the next fifteen minutes or so, Tyler filled me in on his story. The basic contours were as familiar as they were tragic. His parents were addicts and he bounced around foster care for most of his childhood. He got involved in drugs early on and things went pretty much straight downhill from there.

He said, “You know, I’ve spent most my life making stupid choices, being a total loser... Most of the friends I grown up with are dead or dyin’ or in jail.”

We talked about some of Tyler’s own time in prison for a bit, but he was determined to tell me about how he had turned his life around.

“Yeah, you know my life’s been hard, but since I accepted Jesus... Well, it’s still pretty hard actually, but I got God on my side now, and if it wasn’t for him... You know, I’m all cleaned up now... No more drugs and drinkin’... Well, maybe a beer with supper sometimes... And I still smoke cigarettes, but I’m tryin’... The enemy really tries to drag me down... He comes at me when I’m weak and he tells me lies about who I am, tries to bring me back to my chains, to where I was... But I do my readings every night and I fend him off.”

I asked Tyler what he was reading. He excitedly showed me a large well-worn bible opened to Jeremiah 29:11: “I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future...”

I looked at Tyler and his black gym bag. I thought about how many weeks it would likely take him to get back to Nova Scotia at the rate he was going. I thought about the prospects that awaited him if he ever got there.

And I thought about those words from Jeremiah: *Plans to prosper you... hope... a future...* I looked over and saw Tyler looking out the window with a smile on his face.

We were close to the end of our time together when Tyler said, “I gotta tell you, pastor, that I’m a changed man... The devil lost one of his best soldiers when he lost me... That’s why he’s doin’ his best to get me back... But I won’t let him... I have Jesus now.”

I drove Tyler to the eastern edge of town. I pulled a \$20 bill out of my wallet and offered it to him. “It’s not much, I know...” I began, but he cut me off. “Oh, pastor, that’s great,” he said. This will get me a lotta coffees at a lotta Tim Hortons down the road!”

He grabbed my hand and shook it vigorously. “Thanks for the ride, man! It was really nice to have a chance to talk to someone for a bit.”

“Yeah, Tyler. It was good to hear your story,” I replied. “Take care of yourself. And take care of your daughter.” “Yeah, man,” he says, “I will for sure. I got God on my side.”

Hoping against hope.

It would be the easiest thing in the world to imagine a scenario where Tyler ends up back with the drugs and the weapons and the unemployment. It would be very easy to imagine that he never made it back to Nova Scotia.

So many things about Tyler’s story—from his upbringing, to some of the choices he had made, to his recoveries and relapses, right down to his present situation—would make hope seem an utterly unlikely response.

Yet Tyler had hope. He believed that God’s promise to Jeremiah was a promise for him to claim, too. He believed he had a future. He believed that he could fend off the devil and be free of his chains because he had Jesus now.

And why wouldn’t he? This is, after all, how God works, right? In the unlikeliest ways, in the most unlikely stories.

The Bible is full of stories of hope emerging out of impossible scenarios, of promises being fulfilled just when it seemed like it was no longer possible.

Indeed, the story that Lent is leading us toward is the greatest story of all—of life emerging out of death, and hope being resurrected from the ashes of sorrow and failure.

I think that on some level at least, Tyler knew this. He knew what it was to hope against hope.

Abraham knew it, too, even if it took him a while.

We're often quite keen to focus on Abraham's status as a patriarch and the central role he plays in the story of Israel and the biblical narrative as a whole.

Paul certainly is. For Paul, Abraham is the father of everyone who calls on God in faith. It is not a genetic lineage but a lineage of faith, of clinging to the promise-making, covenant-keeping God.

But the story of Abraham's hope is a bit of a meandering one. Like most of ours.

Abraham had his ups and downs.

In Genesis 12, we read of Abraham and Sarah making their way to Egypt because of a famine in the land of Canaan. There, Abraham lies about Sarah's identity, passing her off as his sister because he thinks that if the Egyptians know that such a beautiful woman is his wife, they will probably kill him and take her.

So he allows her to be married off to Pharaoh to save his own skin. Not exactly the kind of behaviour that screams, "faith in the promise of God."

Pharaoh figures out what is going on (with the help of an affliction of a few diseases) and sends Sarah back to Abraham.

You'd think Abraham would have learned his lesson. But he does the *exact* same thing again in Genesis 20 with Abimelek, king of Gerar. Once again, the king finds out what's going on. Once again, Abraham looks more than a little faithless, manipulating situations (not to mention mistreating his wife!) to make his way in the world.

And then there is the story of Hagar. Way back in Genesis 12, God had promised that God would make a "great nation" out of Abraham. Later, in chapter the promise gets

more specific (and poetic). God promises that Abraham's descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky.

The problem was that a few years had elapsed by now, and so far the number of descendants Abe and Sarah had was precisely zero. So, they decide to help God's promise along by using Hagar, Sarah's servant, to produce a child.

Hagar gets pregnant and bears a son, Ishmael. What follows is a story of conflict and redemption that would require a whole sermon on its own.

But, yet again we see that Abraham and Sarah are struggling to hope in the promise of God. They're too old, they have no kids. Maybe God has forgotten about them?

Later on, after the birth of Ishmael, when an angel visits Sarah to reaffirm the promise, she laughs out loud. *As if. Now, I'm finally going to get pregnant, after all these barren years? Whatever.*

So, Abraham and Sarah struggled to live into the promise of God.

And yet maybe you noticed something a bit strange about our Romans passage. Speaking of Abraham, Paul says this:

He **did not weaken in faith** when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. 20 **No distrust made him waver** concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, 21 **being fully convinced** that God was able to do what he had promised. 22 Therefore his faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness."

Excuse me? *Did not weaken? No distrust made him waver?* Is Paul romanticizing Abraham's story? Looking at the past through rose coloured glasses? Maybe.

But whatever else Paul is doing, he sees Abraham's entire story as an exercise of faith. He never gives up on the promise, even if he tries to move things along in inappropriate ways here and there.

He makes mistakes, he stumbles, he struggles to believe here and there. But he doesn't ever give up and walk away.

And then, against all odds, when Abraham and Sarah were years past child-bearing age, when God's promise might have seemed a distant rumour from a forgotten past, a son! Isaac.

And the story kept moving.

Abraham's story is a story of hoping against hope.

And these are our stories too, aren't they?

Many of us have personal stories of times in our life when we were hanging on to hope by a thread, when we doubted whether God could actually be believed, and then hung on for just a little longer to see the promise fulfilled.

Maybe it was the arrival of a child, or a new beginning, or a life of someone we care about turned around, or a revival of faith, or a recovery from an illness that seemed destined to end in death.

The promise might not have been fulfilled in the way we anticipated, maybe not even in the way we wanted. But we found God faithful.

Maybe some of us are struggling to hang on to hope right now. Maybe things look bleak and doubt is creeping at our door. Maybe we have prayed and prayed and things don't seem to be turning out right.

What Abraham's story tells us is that God keeps God's promises, even when it looks unlikely, even when the fulfillment of the promise looks different than we expected or wanted, even when it leads us through valleys of suffering.

And for Christians, Abraham points further ahead in the story to Jesus. Abraham's yes to God begins a long lineage that reaches its culmination in Jesus.

And if we believe in Jesus, we believe that there is no situation so dark, that light cannot emerge from it, nothing in all creation that God cannot recycle and repurpose toward good.

Ultimately, Abraham is not the center of the story. Neither are we.

Our passages on this second Sunday of Lent direct our attention Godward. It is only because of the promise of God that we have hope.

The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The God “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.”

This is why we can hope against hope, like Abraham. Not because of our ability to be faithful but because of God’s faithfulness to us.

Even when things look hopeless.

The God who gave a child to an old couple who had wandered from the path and wondered if God had forgotten about them is the same God who summoned Jesus out of the grave, who brought life out of death, who called into existence something that did not exist.

When it looks like there is no way, God makes a way.

When it looks like the story is over, God writes a new chapter.

This is the story of Scripture. This is who our God is.

And this is the promise that we are invited to live our lives in faithful response to.

Amen.

