

Second Sunday in Lent

Genesis 17:1-7, 15,16; Psalm 22:23-31; Mark 8:27-38; Romans 4:13-25

This Sunday's lectionary is about choice – a choice God's people make each day that has both world-shaping and eternal consequences.

Mark 8:27-38 is not about choosing to give up chocolate for Lent! It is about choosing which side you will be on – and living out the world-shaking consequences because of your choice.

The Gospel Lesson for this Sunday's lectionary easily divides into three parts, shaped by the people with whom Jesus is conversing. In the first section (Mark 8:27-31), he is talking with his disciple band. After a preparatory question that establishes the subject under discussion, Jesus then challenges his disciples with the question, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter responds for all of them by declaring, "You are the Messiah". Jesus tells them to keep Peter's response quiet, and then continues to instruct them that, in reality, he is going to be rejected by Israel's leadership, will be executed and will rise again.

The second section (8:32-33) is a conversation directly with Peter. The big fisherman takes Jesus aside and rebukes him for stating that he will be put to death. Jesus responds by rebuking Peter in turn with the shocking words, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (vs. 33)!

The third section (8:34-38) is addressed both to the disciples and to the crowd who is following Jesus. In this section, Jesus states emphatically that those who follow him have a choice. Either they will truly follow him and be willing to sacrifice their lives as he is going to sacrifice his life. Or they will only appear to follow him, but will actually compromise with the powers of the world in order to stay alive. If they compromise, Jesus will be ashamed of them. If they stand firm, then they "will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power" (9:1).

That is the story. But what does it mean?

The keys to accurately interpreting this story are the two titles used to describe Jesus: "Messiah" and "the Son of Man". Peter answers Jesus' question, "Who do *you* say I am?" by calling him "Messiah". It is intriguing that, unlike Matthew 16:17, Jesus does not commend Peter for his response. Instead, he tells him and the others to not repeat it publicly. Rather, in his response to Peter's answer, Jesus calls himself "Son of Man" rather than Peter's "Messiah". What is the significance of such pointed use of these two titles?

Messiah (Hebrew; "Christos" in Greek) literally means the "anointed one". The word was actually a title for the king of Israel or Judah, much as "Pharaoh" was the title for the Egyptian monarch and "Caesar" the title for the Roman emperor. The term was used 29 times in the Hebrew Bible for specific Israelite kings (e.g. I Sam. 24:6, 10; II Sam. 19:21; Lam. 4:20). It was used once of a pagan king – Cyrus of Persia (Isa. 45:1). In the post-exilic period, after the end of the Israelite monarchy, the term "Messiah" was used generically for Israel's kings (Ps. 2:2; 20:6). Just before the beginnings of the New Testament era, it was used to refer to a "once-and-

future” king, an eschatological king who would be sent from God to free Israel from the tyranny of Rome (e.g., Qumran documents 1Q5IX.11; CDC XII.23; XX.1; 4Q. in the Targums and the Talmud). Thus, the term had evolved from the title for specific Israelite kings to refer to pagan kings, to generic kingship, and finally for the promised king-to-come who would free Israel from dominance by the empires of the world.

The term Jesus preferred for himself in the Gospel of Mark was not “Messiah”, but the far less familiar term, “Son of Man” (8:31). This title evoked an entirely different image than that of a “once-and-future king”.

The title, “Son of Man” is used in two ways in the Hebrew Bible and in Jewish literature of the centuries immediately preceding the birth of Jesus. First, it was used simply as a designation for a man – any given male human being (e.g., Num. 23:19; Job. 35:8; Ps. 80:17; Jer. 49:18). But, secondly, it was also used to describe an “apocalyptic man” (Dan. 7:13, cf. 7:1-18, later fully developed in the pseudopigraphic writing of Enoch¹). The “Son of Man” is presented in both Daniel and Enoch as God’s elect one who has been chosen and called by God to bring righteousness and justice to Israel. He is called to set right the political, economic and religious order so that they would conform to God’s intentions for those systems.

But the “Son of Man” is clearly not a monarch, as “Messiah” would be. He is a divine judge and a reformer of Israelite society and its people – but he is not their king. Rather than being a ruler (that is, one who represents the establishment), the Son of Man is one who is on the side of suffering or persecuted humanity and thus stands over against the establishment as its primary critic and reformer.

Why does Jesus not accept Peter’s declaration of himself as Messiah, but only acknowledges it? Why does Jesus quickly substitute the term “Son of Man” for Peter’s designation of “Messiah”? And why does Jesus immediately caution the disciples, “not to tell anyone about him”? One might immediately assume that the reason why Jesus instructed the disciples to keep his Messiahship secret was because if the Jewish and Roman political, economic and religious establishment got word of it, they would immediately perceive him as a revolutionary and eliminate him! But could it be that the real reason Jesus wanted to keep his Messiahship secret was because he felt that if the people got word he was recognized as the Messiah, they would try to make him their king? Could it be that Jesus wanted the people – and his disciples – to see him as the “Son of Man”, calling Israel to act justly and to work together to establish God’s kingdom, and saw the concept of “Messiah” as being counterproductive, causing Israel to see him as a political revolutionary seeking to overthrow Rome? Was Jesus afraid that his entire effort to

¹ The Book of Enoch is a Hebrew book interpreting the political, economic and religious realities at the time it was written, but doing so from a Jewish apocalyptic perspective. It was originally written in either Hebrew or Aramaic but was then translated into Greek, Ethiopic and Latin. All the original texts and translations have been lost except for the Ethiopic translation; therefore, scholars must work backward from the Ethiopic text to determine the original. Given the historical references contained within it, Enoch was likely written in the first century BCE. It was well known both to the Jews and to the Christians in the first century AD. Thus, concepts and images peculiar to Enoch are used in both the Gospels and in Revelation, and Jude 14-15 quotes a portion of Enoch explicitly. The book particularly develops the role of the Son of Man as an apocalyptic figure of judgment and reformation. The Book of Enoch was so well known at the time of Jesus that his use of the term “Son of Man” would have immediately evoked the interpretation given to that term by both Enoch and Daniel.

bring about the transformation of Israel into the world as God intended it to be was in danger of being derailed by people's lust to have revenge on Rome and their own religious leadership?

Daniel 7:1-19 describes a trial in which the "Ancient One" judges the rulers of the nations (7:9-10). Those rulers seem to be winning in their effort to conquer not only earth but also heaven itself (7:2-9). But look more deeply (7:11)! Although these rulers seem to be winning, in reality they are not (7:11-12). The "Ancient One" has chosen "the Son of Man" (in some translations, "the Human One" or "One like a Human" - 7:13) who is "given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him" (7:14). The evil rulers of the world seem to be spreading their oppression, exploitation and domination of the world. But, in reality, the Son of Man is establishing justice all over the world. Although they do not realize it, they are losing and he is winning – and with him, all humanity is gaining the freedom, justice and relationship with God after which they all so greatly yearn!

Using this symbol of the Son of Man and the content that he knows all Jews understand lies behind that image (as reflected in the immediate paragraph above), Jesus is saying to Peter, to his disciples and to the crowd, "Which side are you on? Which reality will you trust? Will you go with the rulers of this world – the priests, the Pharisees and Sadducees, the Herodians, the wealthy Israelites and, ultimately, Caesar – those who appear to be winning but in reality are losing? Or will you come with me – the Son of Man?"

Thus, in his severe rebuke of Peter, calling the well-intentioned fisherman a "Satan" (Mark 8:33), Jesus is declaring that there is no middle ground. You either concur with crucifixion as the inevitable outcome of opposition to the systems – and thus join Jesus as one who will undergo "great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes and be killed" (8:31). Or you will choose to compromise your convictions, seek to avoid confrontation in order to remain acceptable to the powers that be, and thus discover that you are on the side of Satan!

But what is true of Peter is also true of all the disciples – and even of the crowd. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (8:34-35). If you follow Jesus, then you must of necessity be in opposition to whatever powers there be if those powers serve another god than Yahweh. To embrace Jesus means political confrontation with, not rehabilitation of the state. Those who want to follow Jesus must deny all their natural inclinations toward self-protection and self-interest. They must, with Jesus, become purveyors of a "third way" that works to return society to the jubilee kingdom God intended Jewish society to be. And therefore, they must accept the opposition of the powers that will resist every attempt to call them to accountability. To be a "Christ-one" is to be a threat to the establishment! Therefore, if you are afraid to sacrifice your life in Christ's cause, then you will always be compromised. But if you fear no man or system, then there will be no way they can intimidate you; you will have "saved your life" by not being afraid to lose it!

Jesus then concludes, "Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of

his Father with the holy angels” (8:31). Peter, the disciples, the crowd – and the reader of Mark – must choose which “reality” they will embrace. Will one stand with Jesus, surrender the dream of living comfortably and safely, and give one’s self “for his sake and the gospel’s” (8:35)? Or will we choose to either embrace the seductive unilateral power of the systems or to overthrow that system with an equally oppressive system of our own making – and thus end up standing before the Son of Man and his angels “ashamed” (vs. 38) for the choice we have made?

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16.

The Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous. This is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you” (Gen. 17:1b-2, 4, 6-7).

This is one of two covenants that God made with Abraham (the other being 15:1-18). In this passage, God promised Abraham to both build a great nation through him and then, through that nation, to bless all humanity. Kings will come forth from Abraham and Sarah, God promises. This covenant will be an everlasting covenant that will define the formation both of the nation of Israel and of the way God would continue to work both to bring humanity to him and to build among humanity the world as God would intend it to be. This event, therefore, is one of the most formative events in the Hebrew Bible.

One of the most intriguing elements in this covenant is the use of and the changing of names. In antiquity, a name was important. It was not simply a word that would arbitrarily constitute a distinctive designation of a given person (thus, my name is Robert Linthicum – a distinctive designation that refers solely to me; but I could have just as easily been named “James” or “Peter” or even “Throckmorton” by my parents – and that would still be a distinctive designation). In the ancient world, a name was carefully chosen because it would designate the distinctive of that person’s personality; it was to capture the essence of that person. Thus, “Jesus” meant “God saves”; “Judas” meant “the Betrayer”. Further, to change a person’s name was of particular importance, because a new name would signify a new direction, phase or priority in that person’s life.

The selection of names is critical to this covenant. First, the name of God used in the covenant is not Yahweh, but rather El Shaddai (17:1b). That name means “God, One of the Mountain” or “God Almighty”. “El Shaddai” is used as the name of God most often in Job and in Genesis, and is particularly used when the covenant promise of progeny is being stressed (cf. Gen. 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3; 49:25). By using “El Shaddai” in the actual covenant itself, God is in essence saying, “I am the Almighty One, and if I say this is to occur as a condition of this covenant – then, it’s going to occur!” It is, in essence, God’s guarantee upon this covenant!

Second, God commands that both the names of the husband and wife must be changed. The man's name is to be changed from "Abram" ("exalted ancestor" – a reference to Abram's father, Terah) to "Abraham" ("ancestor of a multitude"). Likewise, the woman's name is to be changed from "Sarai" ("princess) to "Sarah" ("mother of kings"). For God to command this change of names indicates that they are under El Shaddai's authority and power, and are therefore being called both to a new destiny and mission (in this case, to become the patriarchs of many nations). This calling is literally fulfilled, because Abraham will become the patriarch through Sarah of the nation of Israel, through Hagar of the Arabs, Canaanites and Perizzites, and through Keturah the Edomites.² Thus, Abraham will become the father of "many nations", both Gentile as well as Jewish.

This covenant stresses both God's obligations to Abraham (vss. 48, 16) and Abraham and Sarah's obligations to God (vss. 9-15). Such a covenant is not an agreement between equals, however, because El Shaddai is the "king", the "Almighty One". It is an agreement between the king and his subject, which still places obligations toward the other upon both. The recurring message of the Hebrew Bible is that, consistently, Israel does not live up to the fulfillment of its covenantal obligations, but rather breaks faith repeatedly with God. Theoretically, such disobedience would make the covenant null-and-void. But not for Yahweh! Although Israel repeatedly fails to obey its covenantal obligations, God continues to obey His commitments. He remains faithful to His promises, even when humans are faithless (cf. Lev. 26:44-45; Deut. 4:30-31). This is the Hebrew origin of the New Testament concept of grace!

Thus, in our Old Testament lesson for the Second Sunday in Lent, God makes an everlastingly binding covenant with Abraham and Sarah. God's obligation is to "make you the ancestor of a multitude of nations" and "kings shall come from you" (17:4, 6), so that the whole world might be blessed. Abraham and Sarah's obligation, as a sign of obedience to this covenant, is that "throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old" (17:12).³ God will keep his part of the bargain. Will Abraham keep his?

Psalm 22:23-31 is all about obedience to God's call. It is the description of how one who is faithful to Yahweh has to bear the consequences of such faithfulness. And that ultimate consequence is death.

It was Psalm 22:1 that was quoted by Jesus from the cross (Matthew 27:46). But many biblical scholars believe that he actually quoted the entire psalm rather than just its opening lines. The reason why that possibility is suggested is that it is *the* classical prophecy of the suffering and execution of God's suffering servant, his "Son of Man", the Messiah.

² Intriguingly, Abraham as the progenitor of Israel, the Arabian culture, Edom, Canaan, and associated nations has been confirmed through DNA which both traces the above ethnic groups that are still extant and those that become extinct back to a common ancestor around 2000 BCE – the time-period in which Abraham lived. DNA evidence can be gathered on nations now extinct through excavation of their cities and then retrieving DNA samples from their bones. The DNA evidence demonstrates common origin of the peoples inhabiting Palestine in 1200 BCE.

³ The Hebrew word for covenant, "berith" is also the Hebrew word for "to cut"!

It begins with a powerful cry for help directed to God. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest” (22:1-2).

It is a very poignant and powerful cry of distress. The servant feels utterly abandoned by God and rejected by humanity. It therefore captures the very essence of the pain of those who would follow Yahweh in utter obedience – but most eloquently of all, the Son of Man (Messiah).

Consider how this psalm describes one who is truly being rejected and sacrificed by his people. Consider these well-known passages selected from Psalm 22:

“All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads. ‘Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver – let him rescue the one in whom he delights’” (vss. 7-8).

“Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother’s breast. On you I was cast from birth, and since my mother bore me, you have been my God” (vss. 9-10).

“I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast” (vss. 14-15).

“I can count all my bones. They stare and gloat over me; they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots” (vss. 17-18).

“I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you” (vs. 22).

“For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him” (vs. 24).

“To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him! Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it” (vss. 29-31).

Romans 4:13-25. Referring back to our Old Testament lesson for today, as well as to Genesis 15:6 (the other covenant story), Paul demonstrates that Abraham had a choice (as did Sarah) when God made covenant with him. He could have chosen on the basis of what appeared overwhelming facts: that he was over 100 years old and therefore most likely not potent, that Sarah had always been barren, and that she was now past menopause. And he could have concluded, “There is no way that I can propagate and Sarah conceive; why even try?” Or, Abraham could choose to take God at God’s word, and against all human sense, obey God and believe he could successfully impregnate Sarah.

Abraham chose to believe God and God's promise to him. Abraham chose to believe, "fully convinced that God was able to do what God had promised" (4:21). Therefore, Paul concludes, "It was that faith that was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness" (4:22)!

Paul is making a carefully-nuanced argument here. Abraham's actions, he states – both in getting circumcised (that is, obeying the covenant by taking God at God's word before Sarah had conceived and therefore before the covenant had been proven) and in acting to impregnate Sarah, "depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants" (4:16). In other words, Paul is arguing that the fulfillment of the covenant didn't depend either upon Abraham submitting to circumcision or by his "work" of having sexual intercourse with Sarah. It depended upon Abraham's faith – that is a firm trust in God's promise that Abraham demonstrated through his action. And such faith, to be workable faith, was in turn built upon the grace or absolute dependability of God as one true to His word!

Because God's promise was received by Abraham's faith in God's dependability, it consequently rested on God's grace. "Had it been on the basis of works, the promise would have failed. Had it been on the basis of circumcision, it could have been received only by Jews. Because it is by faith, and therefore by grace (by God's actions, not humanity's), it is guaranteed to come to Abraham's true spiritual offspring, whether Jew or Gentile".⁴

Thus, Abraham chose to believe God. And as the result, "many nations" were blessed – not because they were to be birthed from the physical seed of Abraham, but because he chose to believe God and to act upon that belief – and therefore "his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness" (4:22).

Abraham chose. Jesus chose. Peter eventually chose. The disciples chose. Paul chose. For many, they paid for their choice with their lives. But because of their choice, "the kingdom of God has come with power" (Mark 9:1).

And what about us? What will we choose to do with our lives?

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⁴ R.C. Sproul, *The Reformation Study Bible* (Orlando, FL.: Ligonier Ministries, 2005), p. 1619.