

“Faithfulness—That’s What it’s All About!” based on Mark 8:22-38 and Genesis 17:1-11, 15-17

Delivered on February 28, 2021 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor.

One of my favorite things to do is make breakfast for my children. During the week, we stick to eggs or oatmeal mostly, because they are quick and easy. But on Saturday’s, well, we have ‘Special Breakfast Saturday,’ and the kids get to pick something special because we have more time. So, then it’s pancakes or waffles, made from scratch, with maple syrup. Of course, then there’s bacon for Josephine and sausage for Harrison, who will want a side of bacon too, if there’s enough for both. He eats like a growing teenager at breakfast.

Now, part of the routine is asking our Echo Dot home internet speaker with Alexa to play some music for us. The other morning, I asked Alexa to play songs from Sesame Street. So, that morning’s breakfast routine started with the song, ‘The Hokey Pokey.’ And as I listened to the lyrics, I started thinking about today’s readings. As strange as it sounds, I think the hokey pokey, of all things, might help us understand the relationship between these two texts from Genesis and Mark’s gospel, and more importantly, help us understand our relationship with God.

So, before we dive into the texts, let me give you a reminder of the lyrics – *You put your right hand in, you take your right hand out; You put your right hand in, and you shake it all about; You do the hokey pokey, and you turn yourself around; that’s what it’s all about.* And this progresses with different parts of our bodies, until finally, the song asks for it all – *You put your whole self in, you take your whole self out; You put your whole self in, and you shake it all about. You do the hokey pokey, and you turn yourself around. That’s what it’s all about!*

This week is the second of five sermons I will do this Lent about the idea of covenant. You see, there’s a lot of talk in modern Christianity about our relationship with God, be it as a Father, as a friend, as a Savior, as a teacher, or even a judge, all which hold some truth. But rarely, do we hear about the fundamental relationship in the bible, which is the covenant, or partnership, between God and humanity. We bear God’s image to partner with God in this world.

In the Noah story we read last week, God makes a covenant with Noah and all creation, promising never to destroy it all, even though God knows humans will be evil again. God makes this promise and asks Noah only to be fruitful, and to bring an increase on the land to fill the earth with life. In this story, God has asked Noah to be a partner in this world. The seal of the covenant is God’s war bow laying in the clouds, pointing up to the heavens every time it rains.

Today, we read about the covenant that Abraham and Sarah have with God. This is the third time God reiterates this covenant to Abram, but each time, there is a new emphasis, and a new way God seals the covenant. In the first one, God pulls Abram from his family in Ur and everyone he knows, then promises that Abram will father a great nation in a new land. In Abram, God says, all the families of the earth will be blessed.

In the second proclamation, Abram and God seal the covenant with a sacrifice, as was the custom in Ancient Middle Eastern societies for a covenant like this, known as a Suzerain-Vassal Treaty. With the sacrifice, the animal is divided in two and both parties are to walk through the

sacrifice, signifying that they expect the same fate as the animals should they break the treaty. But instead of having both parties walk through the sacrifice, what we see is that only God's presence passes through the sacrifice, which seems to mean only God is the only one on the hook, if this covenant is broken.

Then in the third proclamation of the covenant, God does something laughable to the world. God clarifies that the covenant isn't just with Abram, but Sarai, his 90-yr old wife, too! And to seal this covenant, God changes their names to Abraham and Sarah. Abram goes from 'exalted father' to Abraham 'father of many nations,' while Sarai goes from a diminutive form of 'princess,' like the child of a ruler, to Sarah, which is still princess, but now means 'a ruler,' someone of authority.

At this point in the story of Genesis, the world has again become a sinful place and the people have made for themselves false gods and even tried to be God. And the whole cycle of violence and oppression that was washed away by the flood has begun again. After Noah, the whole world was back in with God, but it didn't take long for the whole world to pull itself out. Now, God has called Abraham to put his whole 'self' back in, to shake things up, and turn it all around, to be a blessing to the whole world, every family, and restore their relationships with God. Abraham and Sarah partner with God, for the sake of the world.

In today's gospel reading, we find ourselves right at the turning point of Mark's gospel, and up until this point, it has been about exorcisms, healings, miracles, and debates. If you were a sidekick of Jesus, one of the disciples he called to follow him, you were probably never bored. Jesus was displaying incredible power and the miracles were a huge crowd pleaser. So were the teachings, especially in the debates, when Jesus continually shut down the leaders, leaving them at time speechless.

And then in today's reading, Jesus ups the ante and heals a blind man. As I've pointed out before, Mark is intimately aware of the writings of Isaiah, and I even think that overall, Mark has used Isaiah 40 to 55 as his outline for his gospel. Mark writes to justify Christian belief in a crucified King who is One with their God. To do this, Mark follows Isaiah to show that Jesus is the predicted 'suffering servant,' the one who would bear all the iniquities and still deliver the people by the arm of God.

So, in Isaiah 42, when we see this servant introduced, it is as God's 'beloved' – a title which Jesus received at his baptism and in the transfiguration. By tying Jesus to the beloved, Mark ties Jesus to the promise of the Lord in Isaiah, that the eyes of the blind would be opened. Now, up until this point, all of Jesus's miracles have a parallel in the Hebrew Scriptures. However, there is nothing in the Torah, the Prophets, or the Writings where a blind man is healed. Only promises that this would happen with the Messiah. So, here we have Jesus doing what Isaiah said would reveal the Lord's 'beloved.'

Healing the blind reveals Jesus as the anointed King and the servant. Yet, the miracle is strange because it seems like Jesus messed up. After all, Jesus spits in the man's eyes, and he sees a little, but the people around him look like walking trees, until Jesus completes the healing, now by

touching the man's eyes. But I assure you this was not a mistake, or botched miracle, but a profound point Jesus made.

Immediately after this miracle, he asks the disciples what the people call him, what they reason he is. The people do see him as special like John the Baptist, Elijah or another prophet, but much like the man who saw for the first time, they do not see clearly. So, Jesus asks the disciples what they call Jesus, who they say he is and Peter steps up. He gives what seems like the right answer, because he recognizes Jesus as the Christ. Indeed, Peter is right, but the next encounter shows he does not see this clearly, because he does not also see Jesus, as the suffering servant. He sees Jesus only as a King the way the world sees Kings, and that kind of King should not be betrayed, suffer and die.

Friends, it is in this moment in Mark that Jesus turns from showing the disciples who he is by what he is doing, to teaching them what it means that he is who he is – that he is the Suffering Servant. You see, Peter speaks of the Kingdom when he proclaims Jesus is the Messiah, but then he speaks of the world, when he tries to skip the suffering, when he tries to move past the uncomfortable death Jesus spoke of.

Like Israel centuries earlier, he wants a King like the world has, like Caesar, and he refuses to believe what God had foretold in Isaiah. Peter puts his whole self in for a moment, but then he takes his whole self out. Indeed, Peter has taken Jesus aside to do this, but Jesus is the one who brings it back out in the public eye. While Jesus has asked people to keep quiet about the miracles and his identity, this is probably because he doesn't want people thinking he'll be like the world's kings. Here we see Jesus speak the rationale or word for what he will go through out in the open for all to hear, making it very clear what is coming. Jesus rebukes Peter publicly so everyone knows he's wrong.

That's when Jesus tells the whole crew of disciples what it will mean to be his disciple. You see, as I pointed out, up until this point, being Jesus's disciple has been pretty much awesome. Now, there's something more that has to be said about what Jesus wants. I find it interesting that Jesus says, 'Get behind me Satan' to Peter, because at the beginning of Mark, Jesus was tempted by Satan, used like a proper name and borrowed from Hebrew here, where it is a name that means 'adversary' or 'accuser.'

Jesus wants Peter behind him, following him to the cross and ultimately the resurrection. Jesus has no interest in following Peter back out into the wilderness to be tempted. I'm sure it was tempting to Jesus to skip the cross too. So, Jesus tells everyone that if they want to be behind him, if they want to follow, then they will have to fully deny their self, and take up their own cross, and get on the road with Jesus, to follow him, the Suffering Servant.

As I said a few weeks ago, this is not meant to be a gloomy call to suffer needlessly. That is the mistake Peter makes, focusing on the suffering that was predicted. Instead, it is a call to do what Peter eventually does and keep putting ourselves 'in,' and keep dancing through our mistakes until the glory of the resurrection. There has been a tendency in the church to view this verse as our calling to accept suffering, but it is not meant to merely apply some meaning to the

indignities of this fallen world. No, it is a call to walk with the suffering Jesus, who carries the cross for us, and all along the path we carry our cross behind him, On this path, he is working to relieve pain and suffering. It is like the covenant with Abraham, because Jesus calls us to be partners, to walk with him to make this world a better place.

Our calling to suffer is not for the sake of suffering, because somehow suffering is part of God's plan. No, suffering is what the sin of the world inflicts on us. It can be great, even when we are following God's plan. Taking up our cross means persevering through the suffering that comes. Indeed, by Mark's gospel we are given an opportunity to see things clearly, to see Jesus for who he really is and what he has done. This is so that we might grow as partners in this work to relieve suffering and reconcile to the world to him. So we grow to reflect his image in the world around us and bear his love to others, and be Christians in the way Jesus is King, by humbly loving and serving, one another and Him.

Friends, the world tells us a lie, namely that we, in our identities, are what is most important. The word that is often translated as 'life' or 'soul' here is 'psyche,' meaning so much more, from 'life,' 'soul' and 'breath,' to our 'identity' and very 'being,' who you are. This lie says that 'my freedom,' 'my rights,' 'my identity,' 'my wealth' and 'my family,' are what is most important. What's more, if we profess to be Christians, then 'my freedom, rights, identity, wealth, and family, even my country' are all things I must protect, even to the detriment of others, because I am protecting these things because of my faith.

This is the same lie that Rome used to persecute Christians – putting 'my empire' first, because it protects 'my peace,' 'my security,' 'my rights,' and 'my identity.' It's the same lie that the Religious leaders used to betray and reject Jesus, because 'my power,' 'my freedom,' 'my identity,' 'my religious express,' and 'my country,' are first. All these things were threatened by Jesus, who walked along those ancient roads showing them the Kingdom of God by turning all things upside down, as that suffering servant to conquer this world without using the tools of this world.

What is incredible about the gospel message is that God's love is self-giving—it's faithful. You see, Jesus was not concerned about his freedom, his rights, his identity, and certainly not any measure of wealth, or even his own family or country. God in Jesus Christ became a slave, a servant, forgoing freedom for us. God's fullness, yes God's full self was in Jesus who emptied himself, becoming obedient, even to the point of death, yes, even death on the cross that he took up for us.

Indeed, the good news of God with us is that in Jesus, God shared in your humanity and mine, to live as we live, to die on that cross for us, and conquer sin and death, by dying in our place to show us what it means to love, to be faithful and fully human in partnership with God. In this, God fulfilled the covenant with Abraham and Sarah, because God became one of their descendants, to bless every family and every nation through them. By this God gives them a family far greater throughout the world, a family bound by faith and faithfulness, to the God of self-giving, covenantal love.

Friends, it is our calling to put our whole selves in and walk that road as partners with Jesus, to take up our cross and follow him, to join the disciples on that journey to the cross. My sisters and brothers, when we are part of Jesus's work in this world, part of the work to reconcile all things to God through Christ, then we get to see what the Kingdom of God is and will be. This lets us look outside of ourselves for the good of others and to the will of God, looking instead at who he is that is leading us, knowing that God in Jesus has done the hard part for us.

Jesus tells us that if we try to preserve all those 'my' things, try to preserve our life and identity, then we will lose all of them. But if instead, we lose our life and identity with it all those 'my's', and if we do so on account of Jesus and the good news that God did this for us, then we will actually save our lives and identities and any 'my' that matters. There is no profit in gaining everything that this world says to value, if only to lose what God values. God wants to give us so much more – God's love – which delivers a life that is all we need and eternal.

That is reason enough to put ourselves in, and keep turning back and keep dancing. Every time we repent of our sin, we shake ourselves off, and begin again. Friends, the walk of the Christian faith is our commitment to keep doing the hokey pokey. Let us put ourselves in and when, inevitably, we sin and pull ourselves out, we must not make excuses to preserve our lives and identities, justify ourselves. Instead, you and I must put ourselves back in, shake ourselves up, and turn around again, repent, and turn to the God who loves us.

Friends, God loves us so much that in Jesus, God's whole 'self' shared in our humanity. In response, we put our whole selves in, but God knows we pull our 'selves' out in sin. But still, we must do the hokey pokey, even when we don't feel like dancing anymore. We dance even when, like in these pandemic times, we are worn out. Even when the trials of our lives bring us down, we keep dancing. Jesus is calling us to be partners, to walk with him on the road, following the path that he has already tread for us, because it leads to the resurrection.

We must keep on carrying our cross, sharing in Christ's work, looking forward to his glory. Yes, this and turning around, by repenting, turning to the Lord so that even every time we fail, we keep dancing. For like Abraham and Sarah, who kept dancing faithful to God, this is our faithfulness, and our covenant obligation, to keep God as our dance partner because faithfulness, that's what it's all about. Amen.

# Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)  
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in *bold italics*.

Mark 8:22-38 (Pastor's Translation) And Jesus and his **disciples** went into the villages of Caesarea-Philippi and on the way, he was **questioning** his disciples, saying 'Whom do **people** reason that I am?' And they answered **Jesus** that they were calling him '**John** the Baptist, yet also **Elijah**, but others say that he is one of the prophets.' And he was questioning them, 'But who do you all **reason** that I am?' Responding, **Peter** called to him, 'You are the **Messiah**.' And Jesus admonished them in **order** that they should tell no one about him. And Jesus **begin** to teach them that it is necessary for the Son of **Man** to **suffer** many things and to be **rejected** by the elders and the **chief** priests and the scribes and to be killed. Then, after three **days** he is to be resurrected. And he spoke this rationale openly. Peter, having then taken him aside, began to **rebuke** him. And having turned away and having looked at his disciples, Jesus rebuked Peter and **spoke**, 'Get behind me **Satan**, for you do not **judge** by the things of **God**, but the things of **humanity**.' Then having **summoned** the crowd with his disciples, he said to them, 'If you **desire** to go behind me fully **deny** yourself, take up your **cross** and come on this road with me. For if ever you might desire to save your **life** and your own **identity**, you will lose it. 'But whoever will **lose** their life and their own identity on my **account** and for the **good** news, they will **save** it. What does it **profit** a **person** to **gain** the whole **world**, yet **forfeit** their life and identity? For what can you **give** in **exchange** for your life, your whole being? 'For if ever anyone might be ashamed of me and my rationale in this unfaithful and sinful generation, then also the **Son** of Man will be ashamed of them when he shall come in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'