

**“Faithfulness – That’s What It’s All About” based on Mark 9:22-38 and Genesis 17:1-17**  
**Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on February 25, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

I’m going to start with an apology for what I’m about to do to you. But before you blame me, remember our brother John Auten who needs our prayers and couldn’t be with us today. He is still recovering but doing better. Remember him because I used the illustration I’m about to use at my last church and he watched the video as a member of the Pastor Nominating Committee.

Then the last time this text came up, he asked why I didn’t do this sermon again. I said I’d do it another time. Well now it came up again, so blame him, not me, because as strange as it sounds, I want you to call to mind that little used hymn – “Hokey Pokey.”

So, let me remind you 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!”*

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 for God and Abram to seal the covenant.

In the first one, God pulls Abram from his family in Ur, and therefore, away from everyone he knows. Then God 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. When Abram visited the land promised by God, he put up altars as reminders of this promise.

The second time God states the covenant, Abram and God seal this promise with a sacrifice, as was the custom in Ancient Middle Eastern treaties for major agreements. Multiple animals were divided in two and set at opposite ends of a path and both parties were supposed to walk through essentially saying whoever breaks this covenant will suffer the fate of these animals. But instead of having both parties walk through the sacrifice, only God’s presence passes through the sacrifice. Abram doesn’t walk it. This seems to mean that it is only God who is on the hook to die, if this covenant is broken.

Yet despite God saying this is my covenant to keep, Abram and Sarai then decide they need to do something to make the promise true. So, they have Abram father a child with Sarai’s enslaved servant from Egypt. So, now God, no doubt shaking God’s head, has to come back to chat again. God clarifies that the covenant isn’t just with the 99-year-old Abram, but with Sarai, his 90-yr old wife, too!

And to seal this covenant, God changes their names to Abraham and Sarah. Abram goes from ‘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’ with authority.

Oh, and one more thing, since Abram had tried to usurp God’s plan, God promises to take care of Ishmael, but now Abraham and all the men in his camp are required to be circumcised. Let’s just say God wants Abraham to remember this covenant.

Let's flip to our reading from Mark, where we find ourselves at the turning point in the gospel. You see, 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 and debates were crowd pleasers.

And then, Jesus ups the ante by healing a man who is blind. You see, all the miracles before – someone in the Old Testament had done that. God used someone else to do those miracles. But nowhere in the Old Testament is someone who is blind given the ability to see. It is only in Isaiah then that the opening of the eyes of the blind is mentioned as a sign of the Messiah. It is mentioned in Isaiah's Suffering Servant, because in chapter 42 when the Servant is introduced namely as God's "beloved," like in the Baptism and Transfiguration, the prophet predicts this miracle.

Mark does not want us to miss this connection, even as he shows us that in his story, but Peter misses it entirely. Even so, 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. They look like that until Jesus completes the healing. Now he does it by touching the man's eyes. But I assure you this was not a mistake, or botched miracle, but a profound illustration Jesus makes about his disciples.

We see the point when he asks the disciples who people say he is and who do they say he is. The people see him as special, perhaps 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. Peter steps up. He gives the right answer. He recognizes Jesus as the Christ.

But...in the next encounter Mark shows us that Peter did not see clearly, because he did not also see Jesus, as the suffering servant. He saw Jesus only as a King the way that humanity sees Kings, and that kind of King should not be betrayed, suffer, and die.

Friends, it is in this moment in Mark that we see Jesus shift from showing the disciples who he is by what he is doing, to revealing 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. He wants a worldly King, perhaps one like Caesar even, 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 pulls – the word is one for grabbing – Jesus aside to do this, but Jesus turns his back on him and brings it back out in the public eye, and he speaks very openly. What's more, Jesus rebukes Peter publicly so everyone knows he's wrong. I find it interesting that Jesus turns away from Peter and says, 'Get behind me Satan,' because it matches the beginning of Mark, Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness. Now we see Jesus wants Peter behind him, following him to the cross, and ultimately the resurrection. Jesus has no interest in following Peter back into the wilderness to be tempted.

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. This is not meant to be a gloomy call to suffer needlessly and seek out suffering. That was Peter's mistake. He focused on the predicted suffering part. Instead, taking up

the cross is a call to do what Peter eventually does, and just keep putting ourselves 'in.' That means dancing through our mistakes, even, until the glory of the resurrection. This is a call to walk with the suffering Jesus, who carries the cross with us and for us, all along the path we carry our own cross with him.

Along that path we see Jesus seeking to alleviate the suffering of others because on this path. He bears our iniquities, the prophet Isaiah says, and by his stripes our wounds are healed. It is like the covenant with Abraham, because Jesus calls us to walk with him to be a blessing to all the nations – all people.

Our calling to suffer is not for the sake of suffering, as if suffering is what God desires. No, suffering comes no matter what because suffering is what sin in the world inflicts on us – it comes whether we like it or not. We suffer even – or especially – when we are following God's plan, because taking up our cross means persevering through this sinful world. Mark helps us see who Jesus is, so we might join him in this work to relieve suffering when we encounter it and participate in reconciling the world through Jesus.

Friends, to do this, we must resist the temptation to avoid suffering, by hiding from others and protecting ourselves. You see, when Jesus says that if we desire to save our life, we must lose it because suffering comes anyway.

In our translation today, it may have caught you off guard because you didn't hear "life" and then "soul" in the reading. It's the same word translated as life in laying down our life, and "soul" in what does it profit a man to gain the world and lose his soul."

The word we translate as life here is 'psyche,' which means much more. It means life, or soul, or our whole self – our being. With that in mind, think about how the world tells us to focus on protecting ourselves from others, protecting, 'my freedom,' 'my rights,' 'my identity,' 'my wealth' and 'my family.'

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 expression,' and 'my country,' are first.

But Jesus says that if we protect these things, we will lose them. Yet if we lay them down, we will be able to pick them up again. You see, suffering comes regardless, so Jesus tells us not to over value these things, and instead seek first the Kingdom of God, not the comfort of the world.

Jesus turns all things upside down. Jesus is the suffering servant. He was sent to conquer this world without violence, without manipulation, without protecting himself, without using the means of corruption and falsehood the world says is 'ok' if your cause is 'ok.' This is because the gospel message is that God's love is self-giving—it's faithful.

God is going to do what God is going to do and we can trust in God's covenants, because God in Jesus Christ came enslave as a servant, forgoing freedom for us. God's fullness, yes God's whole self was in Jesus, who emptied himself of his divine rights, which as we learned with Noah could include destroying us. But he forgoes that by becoming obedient to all our human limits, as Paul says, even to the point of death, yes, even death on the cross, 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, to conquer sin and death by dying in our place to show us what it means to love – faithful and fully human in partnership with God.

In Christ, God fulfilled the covenant with Abraham and Sarah, because God became one of their descendants, to bless the nations through them. By this God gives Abraham and Sarah a family far greater throughout the world. It is a family bound by faith and faithfulness, to our God of self-giving love.

It was ridiculous that a 99- and 90-year-old have a kid. No wonder they didn't trust the promise and tried to do it on their own. But even more ridiculous – a stumbling block even – is that God would be born a human being just like one of us, a descendant of Abraham and Sarah to die and rise for us. But then this is the God we love and serve, because our God loved and served us first.

My sisters and brothers, we are called then to put our whole selves in and walk with Jesus. We are called to take up our cross and follow him and to join the disciples on that journey to the cross. We are called to join in Jesus's work to reconcile all things to God through him, revealing what the Kingdom of God is and will be. God wants us, just as we are, to trust in Jesus, and be faithful as God is faithful.

This is reason enough to put ourselves in, but like Peter, we go in sometimes and then pull ourselves out, just as the song says. We do this when we sin and hold back the gifts God has given us, such as grace and love, because we are afraid we might lose them or the things the world values. But if we get back in and shake ourselves off, then just as the song says we can turn ourselves back around to that cross – to the God who loves us enough to share in our humanity and die for us. That's what it's all about. That's what repentance is. It's turning around.

Friends, God loves us so much that in Jesus, God's 'whole self' shared in our humanity. This is God is chasing us down and pursuing us with a never-ending covenantal love. We make mistakes. None of us are perfect, but we are all loved by this love all the same. Turning ourselves around to receive that love is faithfulness.

What's more, we must do this even when we don't feel like dancing anymore, because what God is saying here is that our sin does not define us. Sin can be and is forgiven. There is no reason for us to be ashamed of what God is asking us to do because it is by the cross that we are defined and made heirs in Christ, according to the promise made to Abraham.

When life brings you down, keep going, know that you can trust in God's faithfulness. You see Jesus calls us to walk with him, not alone, and asks yes, Jesus even calls us to dance with him, following the path that he has already tread for us. This path of Jesus leads out of suffering. It goes beyond death, and into the resurrection. We must keep on carrying our cross, sharing in Christ's work, looking forward to his glory.

Beloved, do the hokey pokey. Put your whole self in. Should the world and fear cause you to take your whole self out, don't worry, Abraham and Sarah did that. Look who they are. We make plenty of mistakes, but we can keep putting our whole selves back in to shake and keep dancing, learning to trust in God's love to share that love more and more.

You see, don't be ashamed of God's promises. God is your dance partner, so do the hokey pokey, and put yourself back in, shake yourselves off, and turn yourself around, because yes, Christ's arms are open. They are open on that cross. This is his faithfulness, and that's what it's all about. Amen.

Mark 8:22-38 – Translation for Service:

Jesus and his disciples went to Bethsaida, and they brought to him a man who was blind, and they called out beside him in order that Jesus might touch him. Having taken hold of the hand of the man who was blind, Jesus led him out of the village. Then, having spit on his eyes and having laid hands upon him, Jesus asked him, "Do you see anything?"

And having looked up, he was saying, "I see the people for I see them walking as trees."

Then again, Jesus laid hands upon his eyes, and he opened his eyes. He was restored. He had begun to see everything clearly. Jesus sent him home saying, "Do not enter the village."

And Jesus and his disciples then went into the villages of Caesarea-Philippi and on the way, he was questioning his disciples, saying 'Who do people say that I am?' And they answered Jesus that they were calling him 'John the Baptist, yet also Elijah, but others say one of the prophets.'

And he was questioning them, 'But who do you all say that I am?'

Responding, Peter called to him, 'You are the Messiah, the Christ.'

And Jesus warned them, so that they should tell no one about him.

And Jesus began 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 word, or reasoning, openly.

Then having pulled Jesus aside, Peter began to rebuke him. But Jesus turned away and having looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and spoke, 'Get behind me Satan, for you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of humanity.'

Then having called the crowd before him with his disciples, he said to them, 'If anyone desires to come after me, let them deny themselves, and let them take up their cross and walk with me. 'For if ever you might desire to save your life, you will lose it. But whoever will lose their life 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? For what can you give in exchange for your life? For whomever might be ashamed of me and my words in this unfaithful and sinful generation, then the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he shall come in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'