

**SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S
"A COMMUNITY OF HOPE"**

Conundrum, Comfort & Catapult

**The Second Sunday in Lent, Year B
March 8, 2009**

**The Rev. Dr. Mario Gonzalez del Solar
St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, Richmond VA**

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty ; walk before me and be blameless. 2 I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers." 3 Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, 4 "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. 5 No longer will you be called Abram ; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. 6 I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. 7 I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.

God also said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. 16 I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her."

What begins with a 'C' and is a Conundrum, a Comfort, and a

Catapult—all at the same time? I'll tell you—God's Covenant with his people. A

covenant is a binding promise one person makes to another. In our reading from Genesis 17 this morning, God makes a covenant with Abram and all his descendants. Actually, God here is reiterating a covenant promise he had already made to Abram some years earlier. In chapter 15, he promised Abram he would have a son to inherit his property. The Lord showed him the stars in the night sky and said his descendants would outnumber them, and we're told in Genesis 15:6, **“Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”**

Usually a covenant promise requires something from the lesser party to the covenant. In this case, the Lord requires that Abram **“walk before me and be blameless”**. But in any case, it's the person who initiates the covenant has the full responsibility for carrying it out. Almost 4,000 years ago, God told Abram exactly what he would do for him in this covenant promise. And that is exactly what God has done.

In our reading, God promises Abram that he will have tremendous numbers of descendants, that they will include kings and entire “nations” or ethnic groups. God changes his name to “Abraham,” which means “father of many nations”, and he changes Sarai's name to “Sarah”, “princess”, showing that she will be the ancestor of royalty as well. God makes this covenant promise to Abraham when he is ninety-nine years old, and Sarah is ninety. They are far, far too old to have children.

But of course, they did. Sarah gave birth to Isaac, who became the father of Jacob or Israel, who was the father of the twelve sons who became the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel. And from one of those tribes, Judah, came Jesus Christ, the Son of God, whom God put forth as a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of all who believe in him.

This is what God promised, and he has made good on that promise. Paul points out that by faith, you and me—Christians--are included in the huge crowds of descendants the Lord promised to Abraham. When Abraham, **“believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,”** God applies that same faith to us. In verses 23-25 of our reading from Romans 4, Paul says, **“The words ‘it was credited to him’[i.e., to Abraham] were written not for him alone, 24 but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness--for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. 25 He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.”** This is what Jesus calls **“the new covenant in my blood”** (Luke 22:20).

But God’s covenant can be a conundrum. If, like all covenants, it’s the giver’s, in the case God’s, responsibility to fulfill it, that must mean we’re not involved. If God is going to forgive us all our sins and pour his eternal life into us through the Holy Spirit, why do we have to do anything but believe beliefs? Can’t

we just assent to these concepts and then sin all we want and ignore God, because we know he is obligated to make good on his covenant, and save us anyway?

No. The reason is that this covenant is not just for us, it's for others.

Yes, Abraham **“believed God, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”**

But what exactly did Abraham believe? He believed that God was going to bless him so that in turn, through him, all the nations of the world would be blessed.

When God first called Abraham, he told him, **“I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” (Genesis 12:3)** God's covenant is only a

conundrum when we see it only as a benefit for us and not as God's purpose of radiating his goodness and glory and love to others.

God's covenant is also a tremendous comfort. We need the comfort of knowing that it's ultimately God's responsibility to fulfill his covenant in us. Let

me emphatically say that ***doesn't mean we have no part***. Our part is to obey

God in all we think, all we say, all we do. But we can only do that as God works through us. We can't do it on our own. As Paul tells the Philippians, **“it is God**

who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.”

(Philippians 2:13) What does he mean? First, we can't manufacture a desire

for God in ourselves. In fact, because we're born sinners by nature, we are innately allergic to God. Our desire for God comes from God. The same goes for our desire

for the good of other people. We can't “gin it up” on our own—it comes from God.

Left to ourselves, we'd rather not get involved with helping other people, especially when it becomes costly or inconvenient.

I think the area most of us struggle with is sin. We wonder if we'll ever conquer our overeating, or our gossip, or our complaining, or our bad attitude, or whatever. But Chuck points out that giving up things has no purpose unless we replace them with something else. He says it's like a toddler with a toy in each hand who wants to pick up a third. He can't until he drops one. In the same way, we can't have more of God until we have less of whatever is standing between ourselves and God, and it's God who gives us the grace and power to let go of our sins and hold more tightly to him. God's covenant promise is to make us like himself, and he has committed to that promise in the death of his own Son for us. What a huge comfort that is!

And God's covenant is like a catapult that launches us into our true purpose: to announce and demonstrate his purpose in the world through Jesus Christ. A catapult is an extremely powerful device. You may have thought the military stopped using catapults when they stopped laying siege to castles, but you're wrong. It is absolutely impossible for a modern jet fighter to take off from an aircraft carrier without a steam catapult. Today's fighter aircraft weigh anywhere from 25 to 40 tons. They are immensely powerful. But even so, the shortest runway on land they can use for takeoff is about a quarter of a mile long.

On the deck of a carrier it's impossible for them to build up enough speed to take off on their own. If they were to attempt it, they would crash into the sea.

But under the deck of every carrier are steam catapults that literally jerk these huge planes from zero to 160 miles per hour in 2 1/2 seconds over a distance of only 300 feet. Without the catapult, they'd be lost. With the catapult, they are launched into the air to do what they were designed to do—fly high and far and fast.

God's mercy and love in his covenant promise to us catapults us into our true purpose. His covenant shows us we are his beloved whom he has created in his image and redeemed at the cost of his Son. Without it we are lost—we can't hope to please God or live satisfied lives as human beings. But when we put our faith in the blood of his Son Jesus Christ for our sins and in his resurrection for our eternal life—beginning now—he gives us power to take up our cross. He gives us his covenant grace to do his will and not our own. We are free to serve and bless others who are without hope in a world that seems to them hopeless. We become more and more the Community of Hope he has called us to be.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, in Abraham you have extended your covenant promise to us, and you have fulfilled it in Jesus Christ, in whom you have atoned for our sins and imparted to us your own eternal life. Pour your Spirit out among

us that the assurance of your covenant mercies may increase in each of us. Make us a blessing to those around us, for the glory and honor of your name. Amen.