

God's Faithfulness
Sermon by Anne Miner-Pearson
Lent II, Sunday, March 14, 2022
Trinity Episcopal Church, Excelsior

The horse was named Jenny and she was the horse-power for a wool carding machine. Her owner was Carl Henry Klemer, an immigrant from Germany, who had hopes that this combination of animal and machine would create a woolen mill. The year was 1865, the final year of the Civil War. The town was our own Faribault. For Carl and the owner of area's first steam-powered sawmill, it was time of grand visions and promise. The Minnesota Railway Company has just laid tracks through the fledging settlement. Major roads passed through. Just a few years earlier, the first Episcopal Cathedral added a religious presence to the vision when the first bishop of Minnesota, Benjamin Whipple, set the cornerstone in 1862. A time of promise and the beginning of merging story of families, businesses, churches and industries with the potential to grow a future.

And for 157 years, the dreams of Klemer were realized. The manufacture of iconic blankets put the mill and the town on the national, even the international map. Probably some of you have a Faribault blanket or two in your house. Maybe it's even an heirloom, something your grandparents owned. A vision that could wrap around your shoulder and bring a smile. Then, production ended in 2009, taking with it a keystone of the town. The promising business became eclipsed by a throwaway culture and cheaper products from overseas. Families lost their livelihoods. Smaller businesses failed. And if that weren't enough, in 2010, a severe flood swept through the town, leaving the building filled with silt, stains of dye, mud-covered boilers and a roof full of holes. The movement toward the vision and promise seemed at the end.

Closer to our time but farther away is the vision of a peaceful Europe. This vision has been generations in the making but, for the last 30 years, this vision has been relatively close to reality. Somehow, as governments and national boundaries changed, the fragile balance between different ethnic roots, political systems, and economic competition managed to hold. Somehow, the world believed that the peace hoped for and worked toward would continue. Then Russian troops invaded Ukraine and the world, we, wonder how to remain faithful to the vision of peace in the talk about "no fly zones" and scenes of horrific human suffering.

Yet again, we are reminded the fulfillment of visions and promise rarely move forward in a predictable pattern - whether it's a woolen business in Faribault or a nation. Whether in personal or communal lives, in our own nation or those in Europe, visions and promise come to times of great challenge. Uncertainty and confusion become the plot line. Feelings of being stuck, fearful, doubtful and helplessness hold sway. The vision fades. The promise shrinks.

It is into such a world, our world, that we are given the gift of Abraham and Sarah's story this morning. If ever there was a story of lives awaiting vision and promises to become reality. it is the lives of that biblical couple. Starting with God's call to leave land and kin and travel to a foreign land, that iconic pair shows us how to ground life on God's vision and promise.

As their story unfolds, again God comes to Abraham and again Abraham believes and acts on the future God places before them. They will have children in spite of Sarah's continued barrenness. They will have land in spite of dividing it with the brother, Lot. There will be blessings in spite of years of struggle, disappointment and waiting.

And in keeping with Abraham and Sarah's almost unending story of waiting, we hear God this morning repeat the promise: You will have descendants, as numerous as the stars. You will have "land to possess". Abraham has questions as we all do when living in such a gap and the tension between the promise and reality: "O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" God answers with a visual, tangible sign.

Although strange to us, God answers in the ancient sign of an unbreakable covenant. The bloody animal carcasses form a path through which the two parties in the covenant are expected to pass. This ritual enacts the oath to keep the promise on point of death. But in this ritual story, only God seals the covenant. Abraham is in a deep sleep while God moves through the path as "a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch." So now, Abraham and Sarah's life, hope and future, rest on God's faithfulness .

Life and hope, present and future, rests on God's faithfulness alone. That is the truth offered in the mysterious ancient ritual story. A truth for us as we live in a confusing, frightening time, in which promising human actions seem hidden as if in a deep sleep. The life of our world rests on God's faithfulness. Our lives rests on God's faithfulness. In all times of uncertainty and tension between possible decisions, God is present.

Yet, our sign of God's promise to bring new life from confusing and frightening times has been given to us by Jesus. By him, we are given the powerful image of the truth and promise imbedded by God into the experiences of holding and waiting in the tension of the opposites. The cross becomes the tangible sign of the unbreakable faithfulness of God. God promises new life will emerge out of the struggle and waiting, when we trust God in the times of not knowing. So, while Jesus calls us to "pick up our cross", it is not so much a command as it is an acknowledgment of what we already know in real life. Whether it's the destruction of a woolen mill or the wanton disregard for a people's freedom and lives, we all bear crosses. We know about attempting to hold complex and complicated dimensions of life together, when we and our world are seemingly suspended in the middle. It is in such times that we must truly hold on to God's faithfulness, God's promise and presence, of new life in whatever lies ahead.

Recently, I was invited to literally create a cross. The invitation came from my participation in a weekly spirituality group. I joined the group to delve deeper into the 4 gospel path material we're using in the Adult Forum this year. We were working through Mark's gospel with its question, "how do we move through suffering?"

When I received this invitation, I was struggling with the decision of when to retire from Trinity. On one hand, I'm 80 years old and in parish ministry for almost 40 years. It's time. But on the other, I love my ministries and you people. Leaving Trinity would mean leaving important relationships and a community. With specific opposites and tensions firmly in mind and heart, I found two wooden strips in the garage. Once cut in two equal lengths, my hands held them in the form of a cross, but I soon realized I needed something more to hold them together. I reached for my knitting bag and found three loose yarns ends. I began to wrap them around the center to secure the two strips together.

I started looping the yarn evenly and artistically, but the strands soon became hazard and irregular. I pondered my work. Should I unravel the strands and start again? No, I decided to leave them. Life in the tension of opposites is always messy and untidy. When there were enough yarn turns, I faced the dilemma of how to tie the ends. Do I knot them? And is this “the end”? And especially, what will be the new life ahead? That’s when I considered the yarn again. The yarns were meant for newborn baby hats. Surprisingly, God promise of new life was at the center of my cross. God’s promise of new life is at the center of all ours and the world’s crosses. Amen.

