

**Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16. Context.** This week's reading is a culmination of a series of promises of land and offspring that God makes to Abram. Like the covenant God had made with Noah, God takes the initiative and makes the covenant "everlasting," at least from God's side. In this telling of the story we learn that the relationship of Abram and Sarai with their God transforms them: Abram becomes Abraham, Sarai becomes Sarah. Not only does God promise offspring, but also that they will be the ancestors of nations and kings. God's promise is all the more unbelievable since both Abraham and Sarah are well beyond their child-bearing years and have never had any children together. In the verses passed over in this week's reading (vv. 8-14), God instructs Abraham to circumcise all the males of his entire household as a sign/reminder of this covenant, including himself.

***When Abram was ninety-nine years old, 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." Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you 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. ...God said to Abraham, "As for Sarah your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."***

**Reflection.** How has your trust in God transformed you?

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**Psalms 22:23-31. Context.** These verses of the Psalmist can be read as a reflection of the trusting and faithful response of Abraham and Sarah to God's promise. The psalmist praises God for answering the call for help and remembering even the lowliest among us, and expresses the joy and commitment of those who trust in the Lord's promises and the universal reign of God – over the living, the dead, even the yet unborn. From the beginning of the Christian church, Psalm 22 has been also used as an interpretive lens for understanding the meaning of Christ's suffering (mostly in the verses that precede this week's reading) and resurrection.

***You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him; stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel! 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. From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear him. The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the LORD. May your hearts live forever! All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. For dominion belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations. 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.***

**Reflection.** Do you trust God to answer your prayers? When God has answered your prayers, how have you responded? How has it changed your attitudes, feelings, behavior?

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**Romans 4:13-25. Context.** Paul wrote his letter to the church at Rome probably from Corinth, probably sometime around 55 or a little later. His letter serves as a "letter of introduction," since at the time of writing, he had not yet been to Rome. In this letter he argues over and over in many different ways, how neither Jews nor non-Jews have any particular advantage when it comes to God's grace and mercy. In this week's reading, he argues that God's covenant with us that starts with Abraham did not depend on rituals, or Torah observance, or even circumcision: God had made God's promises to Abraham before all that. And Abraham trusted in God's promises before all that. Like Abraham, none of us has earned God's promises of blessing by anything we've done. And so Abraham's spiritual inheritance can be claimed not

only by Jews, but also non-Jews, indeed, by anyone who trusts in God's promises of blessing to give "life to the dead" and to call "into existence the things that do not exist."

***For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations") --in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendants be." He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.***

**Reflection.** It is important to understand that faith is not assent to a set of propositions so much as it is an attitude of trust in God's promises. Faith "reckoned as righteousness" doesn't mean that we are somehow more righteous or just than we were before, but that God has acted out of God's justice and mercy to be reconciled with us. We're still sinners on a journey; but it's a journey, that if we persevere, will transform us for the better and bring us to blessing. Got faith?

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**Mark 8:31-38. Context.** In this week's reading Jesus tells his disciples for the first time that he would suffer at the hands of the religious leaders of his day, and be rejected by them; that he would be killed, and that he would rise again from the dead. Peter didn't want to hear what Jesus was saying: he had just hailed Jesus as "the Messiah," the king who would throw off the Roman oppressor's yoke and usher in an age of liberty and freedom for God's people. Jesus calls Peter "Satan" which means tempter (it doesn't mean that Jesus thought that Peter was the Devil): it must have been tempting for Jesus to become the kind of Messiah the people expected. But then Jesus turned to the crowds and taught them that if they wanted to follow him, they needed to be prepared to give up many things, even their lives; but in giving up self-centeredness, they would find new lives filled with joy.

***Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 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."***

**Reflection.** Being a disciple of Jesus challenges us to give up a life lived with "me, me, me" at the center, and do what we do in order to help others. If you really lived your life so that you were always helping others, what would you have to give up? What would you receive?