

"Key Changes"
Romans 4:13-25
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Fourth Sunday in Lent

Let us pray,

Lord, give us ears to hear. Tune our hearts to sing your grace. Help us join our song with that of the heavenly host, that we may live in harmony with all creation. Amen.

In the course of work, whether for a sermon or a Bible study, I often consult the commentaries written about scripture. There are all sorts of modern ones, but some of the most interesting are in the Bible itself. We see Jesus quote scripture in his preaching and teaching – a kind of commentary on what those texts mean and how they can be heard in life. We see in the letter of Hebrews an extended commentary on the Old Testament and Jesus and how they can be read in light of each other. And Paul gives commentary frequently on stories and aspects of the familiar Hebrew Scriptures. Here in our scripture today he speaks to us about Abraham.

Abraham, whose name literally translates as something like "Great Father," is one of the great patriarchs of the Hebrew Scriptures, ancestor of the Jewish people. Moreover, he is the great father also for Muslims, who share some of the same stories of Abraham in the Koran. In our text today, Paul puts him at the forefront for the early Christians. For Paul, Abraham is also an example by which followers of Jesus, followers of God might live. For the Jewish followers of Paul, they would have known Abraham's story through and through.

When God first spoke to Abraham, then just called Abram, God promised him a home, a land. Abraham went to the land God called him to, and God promised him that out of Abraham would come a great nation, a people. Abraham waited and waited for God's promises to be fulfilled in his life – he and his wife Sarah were unable to conceive, until at a great age – 99 for Abraham and 90 for Sarah, God spoke to them again to make a covenant with them and their ancestors, and they had a son, Isaac. This perhaps glosses too quickly – Abraham had his flaws, taking matters into his own hands frequently to try to bring about God's promises, and Abraham was even ready to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac for the sake of God. His stories make up more than ten chapters in the book of Genesis, and he was truly first among the patriarchs held dear by the Hebrew people.

For Paul, he becomes this example to which we can hold ourselves. But Paul's point is interesting – it is not Abraham's virtue that we attempt to embody. His example is not in following the law, or that through any of his own works he achieved something great. Rather, for Paul, it is Abraham's faith that is the exemplar.

Listen again – for "he did not weaken in faith," and "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."

This is why Paul lifts him up – Abraham's faith remained strong through all the changes in his life, and through all his journey. In those years of waiting for God's promises to be fulfilled, waiting for the resolution of the changes God brought.

Faith in the face of change is a tricky thing, and one I have been thinking about a lot lately. Change, as we all know, is a constant in life. It is an underlying current that is a part of so many of the great aspects of life. Grief and loss, opportunity and joy, new beginnings and endings – all are marked by the presence of change.

We feel a sense of change here in the church – we are in the time after David's retirement, and yet before our new transitional pastor comes. A few sermons back, I referred to this as the intertidal zone, where God is calling us as community to journey with Christ in a new way. And we know the sense of stages here – an ending, this neutral zone – the intertidal zone, and then a new beginning to come.

Change is something to continue to engage, and yet challenging even to talk about at times. So many metaphors for change come layered with other expectations, other values. We think of change, perhaps as progress, like technological advancement, and think of it as continually stepping forward to better and better things. Or we think of change as decay, entropy, that things fizzle out and loosen to the point of not being recognizable. Both are valid metaphors, but they aim to describe more than change, so I don't see them as the best metaphors for where we are today, as a community.

When I thought about how I felt in this time of change, it was a sense of driving into the unknown, of wanting resolution but not knowing where that resolution would be found. Not good or bad, progress or decay, just...change.

And so I thought of music, and key changes.

I'd like to invite Aaron to help me illustrate here with some scales. Every song, every tune comes in a key – minor key, major key, sharps or flats in varying numbers. When played on a piano or an organ, it can have all white keys, or mostly black keys. As you can hear, the difference between something in C

(plays C maj)

– all white keys –

and something in C#

(plays C# maj)

-almost all black keys – the difference is small, to our hearing.

Though truly for someone like me who stopped piano in 6th grade, the difference in playing those is night and day. But they're just keys, and you could just as easily set a tune in one key as in another.

We do modulate and change key signatures all the time in music – you can hear it after the bridge in so many big rock ballads, or even in simpler tunes, where you begin in one key signature and end in another.

(Tune C going into C#)

So what does it gain us to think about change as keys? Where we find ourselves will change, and that's okay. Terms of music theory are helpful here – we modulate and undergo development, we can even go through a deceptive cadence, where we think we are in one key and yet end up in another.

(Model deceptive cadence tune)

I was reminded of another music anecdote as I was reflecting about faith in times of change – faith like Abraham's, where the resolution of God's promises can be so long in coming. I've tried to find corroboration of this story, and mostly failed, so let's call it a legend.

The story goes that when Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was young, he liked to sleep in, past when his father liked. So Mozart's father, a composer himself named Leopold, when Leopold needed Mozart to wake up, he would go and play a chord progression on their piano. A major chord progression normally goes something like this:

(Plays progression in full)

And yet, when Mozart's father wanted him to wake up, he would take to the keyboard and play it like this.

(leaves progression off at leading tone)

Yes, like this.

(leaves progression off at leading tone)

Leaving it at that penultimate chord, where Mozart, even in a morning sleepiness, would be driven out of bed, to come and finish what his father had begun, finally gaining the relief of a resolution.

(plays resolution)

From there, Mozart would begin to play, and improvise, and even launch from that leading tone chord into something new and altogether different.

(plays, letting it run and progress somewhere else)

At the risk of driving all of us a little crazy...let's hear that leading tone chord once more –

(leaves progression off at leading tone)

This is where I feel we are – here as a congregation, awaiting that resolution. And it may well be that you feel right here somewhere else in your life as well. There are so many times that we are awaiting that next piece. When will the other shoe drop? When will this open-ended question find answering, resolution? When will we find movement?

Truly, how much did Abraham's life feel like this – God's promise made to him years and years earlier, and yet, when would that process resolve itself. Abraham wanted to go to the new home, and yet God then promised something further.

The truth is that that leading seventh tone can resolve elsewhere – in a jazzy way, in a gospel way.

(starting straight, resolving jazzier)

We can be at a leading tone like this and end up finding ourselves in an entirely different key.

(plays from leading tone into new key)

Indeed for us in all our lives, that desire for resolution, for returning to a home, to a base, to a chord we find comforting, that too can be deceptive – we can seek resolutions that draw us back to where we were, ones that push us forward too quickly, ones that ignore what has gone before or turn us back to where we were.

The truth is that we find ourselves here,

(leading tone)

and want, desperately, to go to here.

(resolves)

And yet that may not be where God calls us into the world. It is almost never how God calls us into the world. God calls us into places that help us grow and stretch, and change. In that change, we find a new belonging and rhythm and direction. Rather than snapping back home, for resolution's sake, we step out in faith to follow along, to sing and dance and play along as God continues to lead us from change to change, ever into a new reality that responds to God's action in the world.

Thanks be to God,

Amen.