

Pastor Carol Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
February 25, The Second Sunday in Lent
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16, Psalm 22:22-30, Romans 4:13-25, Mark 8:31-38

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Please forgive me, but I must tell you a story. You see, I can't read the story about ninety-nine-year-old Abraham and ninety-year-old Sarah without remembering a dear old couple in the nursing home at Wartburg, where I used to serve. Louie was almost 100 years old, and Rose was not far behind him. They were among the residents gathered in the dining room for the communion service that I led every week. I liked gathering everyone in a circle so I could see them well and keep their attention, else they would fall asleep and miss what I had to tell them about Jesus and his love.

The appointed texts for that day included our reading from Genesis. The Lord appeared to Abraham to confirm the covenant He had made with him many years before, and to tell him that, even in old age, he would have a son by his wife Sarah. After reading that text, I turned to Rose and Louie and said, "Imagine! It was like God coming to tell you that you two were going to have a baby!" Oh, how they laughed! Rose just giggled with glee!

Well, Abraham laughed too! That verse is not included this morning, but it goes like this:

Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?"

They couldn't believe it, at first, but God repeated his promise and said,

...you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him.

Indeed, Abraham, became the father of many nations, as his new God-given name means. And Sarai's name was changed to Sarah, which means the mother of a household. And so, God's promise to make them the father and mother of a great nation is fulfilled, beginning with the very unlikely, even impossible birth of Isaac.

St. Paul praises the faith of Abraham, as we read today in his letter to the Romans.

He (Abraham) did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead because he was about a hundred years old, or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb.

They were old, as good as dead, as St. Paul says, and yet Sarah's womb comes alive again and she gives birth to a baby boy. As the angel Gabriel, years later, told a young virgin girl named Mary, "All things are possible with God."

In much the same way, about 30 some years later, a stone-cold tomb bursts forth with new life as our crucified Lord Jesus rises again from death! God indeed works in mysterious and miraculous ways to do what seems to us impossible!

But I'm getting ahead of myself. We're still in Lent, Easter is five weeks away. What I really want to talk about today is this: Jesus said to his disciples and the crowd:

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.

Following Jesus is choosing a way of life that goes against all our instincts to focus on ourselves and our own best interests. We love our lives, and we don't want to lose them! But Jesus says that when we live only to protect and preserve our lives, we will lose them. But if we dedicate our lives to him and let go of self-preservation, we will in fact save our lives.

This is not how we naturally tend to think about life. We tend to think we need to do whatever we can to live long and healthy lives. Now I don't think Jesus would oppose the idea of taking care of ourselves and our bodies, but it shouldn't be our highest priority. Rather, our highest priority is to follow him! Perhaps we can do that better if we are healthy, and yet, how we conduct ourselves in times of infirmity, decline, or hardship can also bear powerful witness to our faith in Jesus and his life-giving promises.

So, what does it mean to deny ourselves and take up our cross? Since we are in the season of Lent, this is a very good time to ponder this question. The key to understanding this is to look at Jesus, for that is exactly what he did – he took up the cross for you and me.

In the first century Roman empire, the cross was the death penalty for

criminals. But Jesus went to the cross as an innocent man. He went willingly for our sake – and for the sake of the whole world mired in sin and death. The cross was his battleground with sin, death, and the devil – and he won. His victory means life for those who faithfully follow him.

In the upper room, on the night in which he was betrayed, Jesus said to his disciples:

No one has greater love than this, to lay down
one's life for one's friends.

This is what Jesus does when he takes up his cross. This is the paradigm for us in taking up our cross and following him.

On the cross Jesus gave up his own life – he sacrificed his life for our sake. The cross is a symbol of sacrifice, of giving up something for the sake of something greater – even abundant and eternal life in and with our Lord Jesus.

Of course, there is a great difference between what Jesus has done by sacrificing his life for us, and what we can do. And yet, even though our sacrifices may seem humble and insignificant in comparison, still they are important and even holy in the eyes of our Lord. They may be a great benefit to our neighbors in need, make the world a little bit better, and a sign of life to come in God's kingdom.

Notice that Jesus says that we must **take up our cross**, as if it's right there in front of us. He doesn't say go looking for a cross to pick up because those crosses will come to us simply by virtue of the needs of those around us, and the brokenness of our world. We are free to ignore those needs, and we often do, especially if we are too busy concentrating on ourselves and our own needs and desires. That's why Jesus also says we must **deny** ourselves. This probably happens to us every day if we are paying attention. Someone calls you or sends you a text and asks for your prayers. You can ignore that request and go on with whatever you were doing. Or you can take a moment to stop what you are doing and pray. Perhaps it's a small example – a small cross to pick up, but it is one, nonetheless.

There are times when we deny ourselves something we want for the sake of someone else. Time, for example. You plan your day to accomplish the things you want and need to do. But then a friend or neighbor needs your help – so you deny yourself and pick up your cross. Same thing for money. Maybe you have set aside some money for a special purchase or vacation for yourself, but then a need arises, and you feel God calling you to use that money to help the

homeless or support the work of a mission organization instead.

Over the course of a lifetime, we may find ourselves giving up on our own hopes and dreams and plans for the sake of doing something else that love requires. Throughout our lives, indeed probably every day, our Creator gives us many opportunities to deny ourselves, pick up our cross, and follow Jesus.

Let's go back to Abraham and Sarah. They gave up their home and country when God called them to go far away to an unknown land. They gave up security, land, family, and who knows what else. Abraham was even willing to sacrifice his only precious son, Isaac, when God asked him to. The disciples gave up fishing, tax collecting, and many other things to follow Jesus. They followed him throughout the countryside, far away from their homes. Where did they sleep? How did they buy food? Then as the apostles they traveled even farther from home to share the good news of Jesus's resurrection. They gave up homes, perhaps family life, safety, livelihoods, and suffered persecution and death for the sake of proclaiming the gospel far and wide.

Since I started working in missions for the North American Lutheran Church, I have come to know the stories of many people who have made significant sacrifices so that they may devote their lives to the work of spreading God's love to people all over the world. They could have chosen other careers – much more lucrative careers – they could have had very different lives. But they heard Jesus's call to follow him in the way of the cross and they responded, and they do not count the cost for they have the promise of life!

We are not all called to be missionaries as they are, but we too are called to follow Jesus by denying ourselves and taking up our cross. Lent is a good time to ponder this and ask ourselves, how can we do that more faithfully, more steadily, every day? What cross does Jesus want you to pick up? What are you being called to give up for the sake of Jesus our Lord and Savior?

To Whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Amen