

## “An Everlasting Covenant”

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Genesis 17:1-7, 15-19

Mark 8:31-38

We usually think of Christian martyrs as from the distant past. But lately they have become a present reality. On Friday we learned that hundreds of Christians have been kidnapped by ISIS in northeastern Syria. A few weeks ago at least a dozen Egyptian Christians were beheaded in Libya. Shortly after, Pope Francis called them martyrs. Meanwhile, the Vatican’s representative there has vowed to stay in Libya to support the city’s small group of Filipino Catholics,\* many of whom are serving there as nurses. What would you do, if you were living in a place hostile to Christianity? Would you convert to save your life? Would you flee? Would you be willing to die for your faith? Does anything good come from being a martyr?

Fortunately this is not an immediate issue for most of us, at least right now. But it *is* a question we need to ponder as we walk with Jesus through the season of Lent. Two weeks ago we took small wooden crosses from the communion table and lifted them high during the last hymn. Then we went out and painted them in beautiful colors. It was a wonderful community activity and we each had an attractive cross to bring home. But decorations are not the point of Lent. The point is to remind ourselves of the path Jesus calls us to take, to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him. And then to walk in that path.

Sometimes people will ask me, what are you giving up for Lent? For many people Lent is about giving up alcohol, or not eating chocolate or sweets, going without some comforts of life for a period of time, almost like a New Year’s resolution to improve your life, only for a shorter time, not a whole year. But the call of Christ is much more than a call away from chocolate. Jesus calls us to let go of our selfishness and self-interest, for the sake of God. And that call affects our entire lives.

Today Tom read the story of Abraham and Sarah, one of the accounts of God establishing a covenant with them. Back in chapter 12 God had called Abraham, at age 75, to take his wife and nephew Lot and leave his country and relatives and travel to a new land. That’s enough right there, to take on a major adventure and change like that, at age 75. Today’s story takes place in that new land when Abraham was 99 years old. Abraham already had one child with his Egyptian slave Hagar, but his wife Sarah was barren. Sarah had never had any children, and she was almost as old as Abraham. But God said, “I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous... You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations...” And it will start with Sarah.

A covenant is a promise from God, a promise to be in faithful relationship with the people of the covenant. And in this case it was also a promise to make Abraham fruitful, the ancestor of a multitude of people and nations. But it wasn’t just a promise. It

was also a call to Abraham and Sarah, a call to embrace God's ways, and take up a new name and a new identity. They were not to calmly settle into old age, drawing into themselves. They were to start something new yet again, and have a child together. Abraham thought this was so preposterous he fell on his face laughing. But I think there was some joy in that laughter. Abraham and Sarah were being propelled out of the quiet security of retirement and rest together, into a relationship with God and future generations of people.\*\*

Maybe that call can help us understand what it means to deny ourselves, we human beings who tend to be self-centered and see the world in terms of our own comforts and safety. Now we all know other people who are self-centered. We know who they are, because we don't like to be with them for very long. They monopolize conversations and don't listen. They are obsessed with their own ideas and opinions and experiences and have no interest in anyone else, except as it may relate to them. We know who those people are. The hard part is seeing that in some ways we are self-centered too.\*\*\* We just don't notice it because it's about us. And everything about us is interesting and important, right? Even if we don't like ourselves, we're still thinking about ourselves, judging ourselves or wishing we were different.

God calls us to look beyond ourselves to something bigger and more important. We are still precious children, made in God's image, who deserve respect. Who we are matters to God and to the world. But God calls us out of ourselves into relationship, with God and with other people. And that relationship with God and others is bigger and more important than our own private worlds. Abraham and Sarah were called out of their own world to walk with God and be in relationship with countless numbers of people. They were called to embrace a bigger and more expansive life, engaged with God and with others.

A few years ago we showed a movie here called, "Of Gods and Men," a French film based on the true story of 9 French Trappist monks who lived in the monastery of Tibhirine in Algeria, and were kidnapped and assassinated in 1996 during the Algerian Civil War. The monks led quiet lives of contemplation and humility. But they were very much part of the everyday life of the people in the small village where the monastery was located. They participated in the rituals and celebrations of their Muslim neighbors. They sold honey from the monastery in the local market. And they ran a modest medical clinic that all the village people depended on for health care and friendly advice.

As the war intensified and news of nearby violence and killings reached the monastery, the monks' superiors in France and the Algerian military authorities tried to persuade them to return to the safety of France. Several of the monks were ready to leave. But during the most dramatic scene of the movie, they discussed together what each one wanted to do, stay or leave, and why. In the end they all decided to stay, knowing their lives were in serious danger. They stayed because of their life together and because of the relationships they had developed with the people of the village, who were also potential victims of the war. What would happen to those people if the monks left?

Who would run the medical clinic? And what would they be going back to in France anyway? In the end they risked their lives and lost them. But their lives had meaning.

Martyrdom matters if it's based on relationships of love. The monks in Algeria and nurses in Libya stayed because of their call to love. Denying ourselves and taking up the cross is not about the suffering that is a natural part of life. Sometimes you hear people say, this or that disease is my cross to bear in life. But our cross is something we choose. Jesus chose the cross. And the cross we bear is the result of choices we make to live into God's call to relationship. Hopefully that doesn't mean being a martyr. But it does mean getting out of ourselves and living for something bigger, the justice, peace, mercy and love of God, realized in relationship with other people.

God said to Abraham, "I will establish my covenant between me and you... for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you." And God extends that same everlasting covenant to us in Christ: I will be your God, no matter what. God promises to be with us, to guide and teach us and give us strength, no matter what happens in our lives. All we have to do is say yes. But in that promise is also a call to life, to stop obsessing about ourselves and open our hearts to God's love. It is a call to relationship, to love our brothers and sisters as ourselves, and be part of the family of God. And it is a call to love the world, in whatever way we can.

May God give us strength, wisdom and love, to live within that covenant, and walk in the way of Christ. Amen.

\* [www.catholicherald.co.uk/new/2015/02/16](http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/new/2015/02/16).

\*\* credit to Caroline Lewis, "A Different Kind of Denial," at [www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3542](http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3542).

\*\*\* credit to Alan Brehm, "The Hardest Choice," at [www.thewakingdreamer.blogspot.com/2012/03/hardest-choice-mk.html](http://www.thewakingdreamer.blogspot.com/2012/03/hardest-choice-mk.html).