

Transformed: Abraham & Sarah

Rev. Cameron D St.Michael – January 19 2024

2nd Sunday after Epiphany

Readings: Genesis 17:1-8,15-22; Romans 4:13-17; Acts 3:22-26 CEB

Reflection: Psalm 105

Greeting: Give praise to God’s holy name! Let the hearts rejoice of all those seeking the Lord! Pursue the Lord and his strength; seek his face always! Remember the wondrous works he has done, all his marvelous works, and the justice he declared! You who are the offspring of Abraham, his servant, and the children of Jacob, his chosen ones. (Psalm 105)

Prayer: Precious Lord, we have seen the way that you can change hearts and lives through your steadfast love and faithfulness. May you help us to remember the transformation we see in the lives that you have touched. That we may remember the faithfulness of your servants Abraham and Sarah and the way that you changed their fortunes as you changed the world. Grant that we may know your peace and grace so that we may share it with others. May you lift our hearts in worship so that we may sing your praises and glorify your name. Help us to reach out to one another this day so that we may love our neighbor as ourselves as we further devote ourselves to loving you, O God. May you prepare us so that we may be transformed and call others to a life that is changed through walking with Jesus Christ, our Lord and friend. And it is in his name that we pray this day. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 105

¹ O give thanks to the Lord; call on his name; make known his deeds among the peoples. ² Sing to him, sing praises to him; tell of all his wonderful works. ³ Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice. ⁴ Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually. ⁵ Remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles and the judgments he has uttered, ⁶ O offspring of his servant Abraham, children of Jacob, his chosen ones. ⁷ He is the Lord our God; his judgments are in all the earth. ⁸ He is mindful of his covenant forever, of the word that he commanded for a thousand generations, ⁹ the covenant that he made with Abraham, his sworn promise to Isaac, ¹⁰ which he confirmed to Jacob as a statute, to Israel as an everlasting covenant, ¹¹ saying, “To you I will give the land of Canaan as your portion for an inheritance.” (Psalm 105:1-11 NRSVue)*

We read the words of Psalm 105, and we hear of giving thanks for God. That we can be thankful for the promise that is held for us. That Abraham’s transformation brings to us a path to salvation and redemption. That God will always be with his people. How have you had your own life transformed by the love of Christ? How can you invite others to have their hearts and lives changed by following our Savior? Who will you lift up in your prayers this week?

Prayer: Eternal God, we thank you for always being there for us. That you are with us in the good and the bad, in the easy and the difficult. We are grateful that you are with us in all that we are and all that we do. Today we remember the promise you made when you transformed Abraham and Sarah through your steadfast love and faithfulness. May we remember the many blessings that you have shown to your people. We come before you in prayer this day lifting up the many joys and concerns that we have. We lift up our celebrations that we may celebrate them with you. We lift up our sorrows so that we may find comfort in your presence. We come together to share the prayers that we have lifted up aloud together. But we also lift up the unspoken prayers that we hold in our hearts. For we know that you hear every prayer that we lift up to you. May you strengthen us in the prayers we speak and the silent pleadings from within. May we know you are there in both our laughter and our tears. May we remember you in our dancing and our mourning. For you are always with us, Lord. May we experience your great love that transforms lives. May we love ever deeper because you are with us. And may we always celebrate Jesus Christ, our steadfast friend and Savior. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon:

Our scripture readings for today come from the Common English Bible. Our first reading is from Genesis chapter 17, verses 1 through 8 and 15 through 22.

¹When Abram was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am El Shaddai. Walk with me and be trustworthy. ²I will make a covenant between us and I will give you many, many descendants." ³Abram fell on his face, and God said to him, ⁴"But me, my covenant is with you; you will be the ancestor of many nations. ⁵And because I have made you the ancestor of many nations, your name will no longer be Abram but Abraham. ⁶I will make you very fertile. I will produce nations from you, and kings will come from you. ⁷I will set up my covenant with you and your descendants after you in every generation as an enduring covenant. I will be your God and your descendants' God after you. ⁸I will give you and your descendants the land in which you are immigrants, the whole land of Canaan, as an enduring possession. And I will be their God." ¹⁵God said to Abraham, "As for your wife Sarai, you will no longer call her Sarai. Her name will now be Sarah. ¹⁶I will bless her and even give you a son from her. I will bless her so that she will become nations, and kings of peoples will come from her." ¹⁷Abraham fell on his face and laughed. He said to himself, Can a 100-year-old man become a father, or Sarah, a 90-year-old woman, have a child? ¹⁸To God Abraham said, "If only you would accept Ishmael!" ¹⁹But God said, "No, your wife Sarah will give birth to a son for you, and you will name him Isaac. I will set up my covenant with him and with his descendants after him as an enduring covenant. ²⁰As for Ishmael, I've heard your request. I will bless him and make him fertile and give him many, many descendants. He will be the ancestor of twelve tribal leaders, and

I will make a great nation of him. ²¹ But I will set up my covenant with Isaac, who will be born to Sarah at this time next year.” ²² When God finished speaking to him, God ascended, leaving Abraham alone. (Genesis 17:1-8,15-22 CEB+)

Our next reading is from Romans chapter 4, verse 13 through 17.

¹³ The promise to Abraham and to his descendants, that he would inherit the world, didn't come through the Law but through the righteousness that comes from faith. ¹⁴ If they inherit because of the Law, then faith has no effect and the promise has been canceled. ¹⁵ The Law brings about wrath. But when there isn't any law, there isn't any violation of the law. ¹⁶ That's why the inheritance comes through faith, so that it will be on the basis of God's grace. In that way, the promise is secure for all of Abraham's descendants, not just for those who are related by Law but also for those who are related by the faith of Abraham, who is the father of all of us. ¹⁷ As it is written: I have appointed you to be the father of many nations. So Abraham is our father in the eyes of God in whom he had faith, the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that don't exist into existence. (Romans 4:13-17 CEB+)

Our final reading is from Acts chapter 3, verse 22 through 26.

²² Moses said, The Lord your God will raise up from your own people a prophet like me. Listen to whatever he tells you. ²³ Whoever doesn't listen to that prophet will be totally cut off from the people. ²⁴ All the prophets who spoke—from Samuel forward—announced these days. ²⁵ You are the heirs of the prophets and the covenant that God made with your ancestors when he told Abraham, Through your descendants, all the families on earth will be blessed. ²⁶ After God raised his servant, he sent him to you first—to bless you by enabling each of you to turn from your evil ways.” (Acts 3:22-26 CEB+)

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

We are starting a new series, and this will run through Transfiguration Sunday, and every week we are going to take a look at a different person in the Bible that had their life transformed. And we'll be looking at the different ways that people's lives are transformed because of their interactions with the divine. And each week we will look at a different person with a different story. Our very first entry in this series is about two people from the very first book in the Bible. Out of Genesis we get Abraham and Sarah. Except when we meet Abraham and Sarah, they are not, in fact, Abraham and Sarah. And I know I may be confusing you a little bit here. Of course, it's Abraham and Sarah. Who else would they be? Well, initially their names were Abram and Sarai. But what we see is a transformation of both their names and their lives.

I feel I should give a little bit of explanation here as to how a name change would really have anything to do with transforming their lives. In the story that we get from Genesis, the Lord appears to Abram. And Abram is told that he is going to become the ancestor of many nations. That through Abram, his many descendants will be part of a covenant with God. They will be God's people. And that in every generation, God will uphold this covenant. That they will

be the people, and he will be their God. And because of this, Abram will no longer be Abram. Abram will be Abraham. Now, in the Hebrew, this is adding a letter. It is adding the Hebrew letter Heh into Abram's name. So that Abram becomes Abraham. This addition also transforms the meaning of the name. We could translate Abram to mean exalted father. But this changes when his name is changed. No longer is he just the exalted father, but he is the father of many nations. A father of a multitude. His name is to represent his position. That God doesn't just change his name because he thinks it sounds better, that he thinks being Abraham is cooler, but because he goes from just being an elder to a leader of nations. That his descendants will be a multitude, a great number. And now, we see the same transformation to Sarai. Because God tells Abraham that his wife Sarai will not be called Sarai anymore but will be Sarah. A Heh is added into her name as well. Adding that letter changes her name. That she is now going to be the mother of a multitude. And the two of them have their lives transformed. That both their name and the trajectory of their lives are altered through an interaction with God.

Now, something I note here is that Abraham could have said no. Abraham could have said, "no, I'm fine with being Abram. So, I would like to keep that." Sarai could have said, "I don't feel like I'm going to be Sarah. I want to remain Sarai. I'm too old to have kids. It will not happen." The thing is that on faith, Abraham and Sarah accept this transformation, the fact that their lives are being changed. And that their lives changing will change the future. From them will come the 12 tribes of Israel. That a great nation will come from them because of the son that Abraham and Sarah will have. Now, we hear about that promise that comes by faith in Romans as well. That we hear about how it is by God's grace, not through the law. And that we see it in that interaction from Genesis. That this promise is for all who have faith. And that is how Paul sees it. That this transformation to Abraham and Sarah's lives is a transformation to everyone who follows them by faith. And in some ways, it means that Abraham is transforming more than just his physical descendants. Because his willingness to have faith in God's plan is setting in motion everything that will allow all of the Gentiles to have faith and become spiritual descendants of Abraham. So that Abraham is the father of both the physical descendants and of the spiritual ones. That all who share in seeking God share in being Abraham's descendants. But this wouldn't happen if he decided he would remain Abram. Because it would mean that he rejected God's offer and that he didn't have faith.

For me, one of the most interesting things about this transformation of Abraham and Sarah is that it's two people who let their lives be changed and had faith in something that they would not see. What I mean by this is that it's not that they will give birth to so many children that they won't be able to keep count of them. They're set to have one son. They have Isaac. That all of this is to come to be through Abraham and Sarah's son, Isaac. But they will only have this one son together. And that through Isaac, there will be Jacob and Esau. And from Jacob, there will be the 12 tribes of Israel. But that's not something that Abraham or Sarah is going to live to see. They accept God's promise on faith. Their lives are transformed, and in turn, they transform the world. I wanted to talk about Abraham and Sarah first because it's easy to see through them how easy it is for the lives of two people to be changed and transformed, and that they in turn transform so many more. Because we often downplay what one person can do, what two people together can do. We look at them and say, well, it's just one person.

What really could they offer? How much could they do? What we see from Abraham and Sarah is that by faith, a lot changes. And by faith, they trust in God's plan. They aren't sure of it at first. Abraham wants God to accept the son that he has had with Sarah's servant. He wants Ishmael to be chosen. But God says, no, this is going to be through Isaac, the son that you have not yet had. And they're not certain at first that this old couple was going to have a child. But on faith, they trust that God can make anything happen. They trust God's word, and they trust that God can make these things happen.

Something I want us to look at over the next few weeks is how we understand the way that lives can be transformed. That we look at the different ways that people's lives can be transformed, and the different ways that people react. Because this week, we looked at Abraham and Sarah. Next week, we look at one of their descendants, Jacob. We will look at the way that Jacob's life is transformed. We will look at Zacchaeus and the way that Christ transforms his life. We will look at Paul and the way that his entire life is changed because of an interaction with the divine. And as we approach the Transfiguration, we will look at the way that Moses had his entire life transformed by God's mission. And we will look at the prophet Elijah and the way that God changed his life. And then we will look at the way that we see both the transformation of Elijah and Moses when we come to look at the Transfiguration and the way that Jesus is transformed for a greater understanding of his purpose.

And so, as we look at all these transformations, one thing I want you to keep in mind is that these aren't the only people that have their lives transformed. These are just examples of the many ways that God changes people's hearts and lives, and that includes your own. Because I know I had my life transformed by the love of Christ, and it wasn't a one-time thing. It is an ongoing process. Because I believe that I am still being transformed, and because of that I call others to be changed in Christ. So, in the next few weeks, we'll explore what it can look like to be changed and to accept that kind of transformation in our own lives. And we will explore the way that God works through us and with us, and the ways that we may hesitate to say yes. But more importantly, we'll look at the ways that we can say yes through faith, to having our hearts and lives transformed by the love of God through living a life in Jesus Christ our Lord. May we always accept the invitation from Christ to have our own lives transformed. Amen.

Prayer of Confession and Pardon: God, you are with us even when we turn away from you. Guide us back into your loving arms. Judge us not by the perfection of our actions but show us mercy and love. We have strayed like lost sheep from your ways, failing both in what we have done and what we have failed to do. Bring us back into your fold that you may guide us and lead us in all things. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and forgive us. May we walk in your love and trust your ways. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in life eternal. Amen.

Offering: If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed below. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

Lord's Prayer

Dismissal with Blessing: May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Current Series – Transformed

This series is a 7-week series about transformation. Each week will look at a different person from the Bible that was transformed by God. Each one tells a unique story about God's love and grace that are there for all people. Each person's tale of transformation gives us insight into how God can heal our brokenness. And each gives us hope that we may all be Transformed through a life in Jesus Christ.

1/19: Abraham & Sarah 1/26: Jacob 2/2: Zacchaeus 2/9: Paul

2/16: Moses 2/23: Elijah 3/2: Jesus

Neoga Grace UMC

752 Walnut
PO Box 610
Neoga, IL 62447
(217)895-2809
Worship 10:30am

Toledo UMC

Madison & Ohio St
PO Box 267
Toledo, IL 62468
Worship 8:15am

Etna UMC

2799 Etna Rd
Mattoon, IL 61938
Worship 9:30am

Rev Camron D St.Michael
<https://stmichael.pw>
cdstmichael@outlook.com
(316)530-3182 (call or text)
PO Box 54, Charleston IL, 61920

* Scripture quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition. Copyright © 2021 National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

+ Scripture quotations are from the Common English Bible, Copyright © 2011 by Common English Bible.