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The holy gospel for this second Sunday in Lent comes to us from the Gospel of Mark, the eighth chapter:

And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they told him, "John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets." And Jesus asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ." And Jesus strictly charged them to tell no one about him.

And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, Jesus rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. And what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

The gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, show us who you are and show us who we are. I pray that as we journey with you in this Lenten season, as you reveal yourself to us in sermon and in relationships and through your word, that our faith

would be strengthened and that our desire to follow your will in our lives would be strengthened, that our lives would bring you honor and that your blessings would not only be for us, but for those around us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

I've come to love this story of Abraham. It's important this morning, as we move to this covenant relationship, that we recognize when the text tells us that Abraham is ninety-nine years old. Abram has already been walking with God for twenty-four years. Abram has already had Ishmael through Hagar thirteen years prior. So this is a special moment, a renewal of the promise and a strengthening of the relationship that God the Father has with Abram, as he changes his name to Abraham and changes Sarai's name to Sarah. It reminds them that the promise of his children and children's children will be through Sarah and that he will have a child, have a son through her and much more importantly that not only is God blessing Abraham and Sarah, but he is blessing their children and their children's children.

We want to recognize in our own lives that the promises and the blessings that God pours out to us, the relationship that God brings us into with himself is not simply for our own sake. It is for our family and for our relationships. It is indeed, as God said to Abraham, that we are blessed to be a blessing to all people.

So as you and I walk this Lenten journey, as we think about the disciplines of our lives, as we sometimes get lax in how faithfully we follow, we want to be mindful that it doesn't just impact us, but also those who are a part of our journey and those who see our witness. So I want to encourage you in this journey of Lent, to recognize that God is faithful and that as we follow him and are blessed by him, that blessing gets extended well beyond ourselves and especially to our children and our children's children.

God's covenant with Abraham is a shift in relationship. It is a recognition of this formal covenant language. God is reinforcing to Abraham and Sarah that Sarah will indeed give birth to a son. That all of the promises that God made to Abraham twenty-three years earlier will come about. He can count on God's faithfulness. You and I can count on God's faithfulness.

And just as God makes this a covenant with Abraham, God often renews the promises he makes in our lives, helps us to be aware in fresh ways of what he is calling us to do or what

he is seeking to do through us, his promises for you and me. He says, "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."¹ I claim that promise. I want that promise for my children and for my grandchildren. You can see this here in Abraham and throughout the story of Genesis as God continues to faithfully reveal himself to Abraham's children and his children's children.

Psalm 22 today teaches us this. "You who fear the Lord, praise Him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him, and stand in awe of him, you offspring of Israel!"² There is a lineage that we're a part of that goes all the way back to these thousands and thousands and thousands of years ago in Genesis. There's a lineage that we are a part of in the faithfulness of the church in following Jesus going back to Peter and Paul and the apostles. We've been blessed by our relatives. Sometimes as they have been an amazing example of faith to us and other times, as they have needed to repent in their lives with things that they've done wrong and we've seen the impact of that. The Holy Spirit has convicted us, so that we can walk in God's promise and blessing.

Through it all, we see one amazing truth. God remains faithful. Even when our ancestors were not. Even when we are not. God is faithful and God is good. Because of that, we can be reassured in our faith. We can experience the call to repentance as an invitation for cleansing and renewal. We can understand that God wants us to walk near him and to experience the blessing of his closeness in our lives.

Psalm 22:31 says, "they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn, that he has done it." God knows and holds the future. That includes again the future of our children.

But we live in a pluralistic world. We live in a world that that wants to suggest the idea that believe whatever you want to believe and if it makes you happy, that's good. That's not the God revealed to us in the Bible. God chose Abraham. God chooses us in baptism. We're invited to not make God in our own image, but to believe in God as he reveals himself.

¹ Genesis 17:7

² Psalm 22:23

In our gospel lesson today, the text tells us that Jesus and his disciples were journeying to Caesarea Philippi. Caesarea Philippi is in the northern part of Galilee. It's up above the Sea of Galilee and it is a place where there is still evidence today of many altars to many different gods.

Caesarea Philippi is the context of Jesus asking his disciples who do people say that I am. What people say about who Jesus is doesn't change who Jesus actually is. The question simply will reveal whether or not they know the truth about who Jesus is. Then Jesus turns to them and says, "but who do you say that I am?" and Peter says, "You are the Christ." In other gospels, it says "You are the Christ, the son of the Living God." There's this amazing proclamation of Peter.

Peter sees who Jesus is ... sort of. You see what we find here in the gospel of Mark is that, while Peter recognizes that Jesus is the Messiah, Peter's understanding of the Messiah is not quite right. For the text immediately goes on. It tells us in verse 31, Jesus "began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again." That did not agree with Peter's notion of the Messiah. So Peter's response having just said to Jesus you are the Christ is to pull him aside and begin to rebuke him, saying Lord this can't be.

And so what is does Jesus do? Jesus looks and sees that the other disciples are a part of this conversation and he pulls Peter aside and he rebukes him, "Get behind me, Satan!" The same Peter that just professed Jesus is Christ still required some correction. He needed to understand that Jesus as Christ was going to be the Christ of God's design and not the Christ of Peter's design. Sometimes we in our lives need to recognize the God will be God, not the God of our design, but the God that God chooses to be. It's the nature of being God.

We're invited to identify with that God. We are invited to identify with Christ. In this text, Jesus says to the disciples and the others, who are there, deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me. The gospel word here is not "well, believe in me and then do whatever you want because I'll forgive you." The word here is "if you will identify with me, if you want to be a part of my family, I'm giving my life for you. I'm inviting you in, but on my terms." God will be God. So we recognize that as we're called to follow Jesus, we're called to submit to him, to

live in obedience to him, to understand that God's values and rules are the values and rules that we are called to live by.

Don't misunderstand me. I know that we all mess up. I know that we all fall short, but that doesn't change the invitation. That doesn't change the life that Jesus is inviting us into, which will sometimes be hard, which sometimes will call for sacrifice, but we're invited to be disciples of Jesus, so that God can transform us into his likeness, as we journey through our lives. The blessings of our obedience will get extended to others through us because of our example, because of our love that we show, that starts first with his love for us.

We're asked to live the life of Christ, to live as Christians. It isn't easy and it's far from perfect, but it's not the same thing as saying believe in Jesus and then do whatever you want. It's much better than that. So we see in Romans 5 these words, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him, we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God."³

We get to stand in grace. The joy of the Christian life is not just that those things that I did are forgiven, but rather we get to walk with God. God walks with us. We get to stand in this purified righteous relationship with God, because of what Jesus has done for us. We have the assurance of Jesus' death and resurrection which gives us this relationship and this promise, this covenant, if you will, in which we stand and in which we live. It is our hope and our security. It becomes our purpose and joy in this life in which we live.

So often in our lives, we've come up with this warped sense of love and we somehow project it onto God. The idea is that I'm loved because I'm lovable. I'm liked because I'm a likable. That is, there something that I do that causes God to love me. I've earned it. I deserve it because I'm just that good. I hope you're laughing because as Christians, we couldn't possibly take that seriously and yet, somehow, that deception works its way in and often it's revealed to us from the back side. That is, when we've done something wrong, we feel unlovable. When we've made mistakes, we think that God will not want to be in relationship with us, not desire

³ Romans 5:1-2

to forgive us. So these words that “God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”⁴ That's the key to this gospel word.

Now you're probably hearing in these words this jumping back and forth between law and gospel, between grace and a call to obedience. What I just want to say to you is that the call to obedience is an opportunity. It's being picked for the team. It's being asked to run the bases for the injured player. It's an opportunity to participate in what God is doing in his world and for the bringing of his kingdom. It is, indeed, the invitation to be blessed to be a blessing. If we misunderstand God's grace, then we fail to stand in the fullness of it. If we think that forgiveness is just license, then we forget that it qualifies us to do that which we could never otherwise do, to be that which we could never otherwise be. It's an invitation for God to begin to shape and mold us into his workmanship, so that we might do those things that he has prepared beforehand for us to do. I love the way Romans 5 says this in verse 11. “More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ through whom we have now received reconciliation.” We're invited into lives of rejoicing.

Now, this text, if you look at it in context, also talks about some suffering and some character development and some other things, But in the midst of it all, we can rejoice because we are his. Because God is good and God is faithful and his calling in our lives will come again and again, and new opportunities and new mercies will come each and every day, as we're invited to follow him.

So take this Lenten opportunity. Take this time in Lent to hear the voice of God in some new ways, to put yourself in a position to listen to his word, and seek to know what God is asking of you and for you and through you. Experience the amazing blessing of being blessed to be a blessing for your children and your grandchildren and for all the nations of the world. Amen.

⁴ Romans 5:8