

**2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent – February 25, 2024**  
Romans 4:13-25, Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Nadia Bolz Weber was in town this weekend and gave the keynote presentation at the interfaith conference at the University. For those of you who may not have heard of her, or vaguely remember *something* about her, Nadia is a Lutheran pastor who gained national attention some years ago for founding a congregation in Denver called House for All Sinners and Saints. The reason she founded the congregation was that she thought there was a need for a church for people like her, people who have had a difficult relationship with the church because they didn't fit especially its cultural standards in one way or another. Her own experience was growing up in a very conservative Christian denomination that actually taught girls and boys the proper way to be Christian women and men – as if there is a particularly Christian way to be a woman or a man. Women, she was taught, had to be thin and pretty, not provocative, and submissive. Men had to be masculine, assertive, and the spiritual leaders of their families. That sort of thing. Nadia did not conform to the standard and ended up leaving not just her church, but Christianity altogether, and stayed away for a good ten years. That's how she tells it. I think I might say that what she left was not Christianity *per se*, but a perversion and distortion of what Christianity is supposed to be. But that's not entirely fair, because she recognizes that in the midst of the distortions, and in spite of them, there was an encounter with God that imprinted itself upon her and from which she could not stay away. There is something in church, she says, that just cannot be found anywhere else. What brought her back was Lutheran liturgy and theology, and that is what I find to be so interesting and compelling about her story. She has an understanding and appreciation of the treasure that Lutheran theology and liturgy are, as well as for how they connect to the ancient faith and worship of the broader Christian tradition. But even more interesting, she has a sense for how they can connect with the real religious needs of people who tend to shy away from Christian churches because of how Christian people and institutions have treated them.

That's more than I intended to say about Nadia when I sat down to write this sermon, but those are all good and important things that lead into what I *did* want to get to, and that is the approach she takes in her latest book, which is about rethinking and reconstructing a Christian ethic of sexuality. It's not the *topic*, but the *approach* to it that I'm interested in at the moment. And that approach is one of what she calls radical honesty – being rigorously truthful about who we are.

Lent is the perfect time to struggle with that, and Paul leads the struggle for us this morning with his depiction of Abraham in today's second reading. Paul's goal here is to demonstrate for his readers how all people have access to God. By Paul's way of thinking, all people means not just his own people, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but also everyone who is not them, the Gentiles. The people of Israel have had access to God through the covenants that we are touching on during Lent this year in our first readings, and particularly through the Law given through Moses. (We get that covenant next week.) The Gentiles have not had those specific resources, but in the initial encounter with Abraham, God promises to bless not only Abraham and his descendants, but all the people of the world through them. And Paul argues that though the Gentiles did not have the law given to the Israelites, God had written the law on their hearts. But nobody, Paul observes, neither the Jews nor the Gentiles, kept the law. So, nobody is better than anyone else, nobody gets to point the finger, and nobody gets to brag. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, Paul famously writes in the chapter before our reading this morning. So by rights, nobody should have access to God. Nobody is worthy of that

access. But God is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,” as we are repeatedly reminded throughout the Old Testament. God is faithful to God’s promises, even when *we* are not faithful to ours, or to who we have been created to be. So why and how we have access to God, all of us, is, through God’s grace, by faith; by trust in God’s faithfulness to God’s promises in spite of our ongoing failure and rebellion. This affirmation of Paul, made perhaps most clearly right here in the book of Romans, lies at the core of that Lutheran theology I was just praising.

And Abraham’s story is a perfect case in point. God calls Abraham out of all the people of the earth, promises to be his God, to bless him, and make of him a great nation. And Abraham believed God. He trusted that promise, and that faith, that trust, made him right with God. Right on, Paul. Brilliant stuff! Before the law was even given, it is clear that faith was the connection to God. But in making his point, Paul (dare I say it?) overstates his case here in chapter four in ways that I think continue to cause us Christians problems. Abraham “did not weaken in faith,” Paul writes, in spite of his old age, and “no distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God.” Really, Paul? Do you have the same Bible I have? Did you read the story, the whole story? I think he did, on both counts. But let us be honest about Abraham’s story and not sugarcoat it. Abraham certainly *did* waver, and his faith *did* weaken. Not just once, but multiple times. He passes off Sarah as his sister out of fear of being killed by the Egyptians. He tries to take charge of the promise by conceiving a child with Sarah’s servant. And he complains to God that God is not fulfilling God’s promise and now it’s too late because he is old. And our lectionary folks are in cahoots with Paul in the verses they have given us to read this morning. Notice in verse three of that reading where God restates the promise (for at least the third time) and Abraham falls on his face before God? It’s a very pious gesture. So, good for Abraham. But our lectionary cuts off at a crucial point after the promise about Sarah having a son and being the ancestor of nations. In the very next verse that we do *not* get, Abraham again falls on his face before God, but this time he falls on his face laughing! The thought of a hundred-year-old man and a ninety-year-old woman having a child is hilarious. And then he tries to talk God into accepting Ishmael, the child he had with Sarah’s servant, as the heir to the promise. This is not strong, unwavering faith on display here. It is at the very best mustard seed faith, a tiny foot in the door of faith, if it is anything. It is just enough faith to continue talking with God and having a chance to hear the promise yet again. And that’s what God does, assuring Abraham that it will be through Sarah that the promise will be fulfilled.

Being honest about Abraham’s story helps us to be honest about our own stories as well. Like Abraham, we too do not have perfect, unwavering faith. Like Abraham, we have our good days and our bad days. And like Abraham, it can take a long time for God’s promises to us to sink in to our being and create the kind of faith that takes hold of those promises and clings to them in the ups and downs of our daily life. We can even be like Pastor Nadia Bolz Weber, who ran away from God altogether for an extended period of time, but whom God did not likewise abandon. The good news of today’s readings that breaks through the editing and overstatement is that faith, however weak or wavering, continues to be our access to God, and God is at work in us right now creating and strengthening that faith to trust that God will be faithful to God’s promises to us and to all the nations of the world, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through baptism into that death and resurrection you are held in the promise of God’s love, forgiveness, and reconciliation for Jesus’ sake and are being made into a blessing for others. So, in the Lenten season of honesty about ourselves and about God, let us rejoice in this good news, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.