Second Sunday in Lent ● February 25, 2018
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 ● Psalm 22:23-31 ● Romans 4:13-25 ● Mark 8:31-38

Their names are Cameron Kasky. And Fred Guttenberg. And Andrew Pollack. And there are hundreds of others just like them. Victims of the shooting on Ash Wednesday in Parkland, Florida. They were not killed in the shooting, but their students were. Or their children. Or their friends. And they have all kinds of ideas about what needs to change. What laws need to change. What reforms need to happen. How the culture needs to shift. But when they questioned their elected officials last week, almost every one of them started their question, their lament, their complaint the same way. "I want you to look at me."

That tells you something. It tells you that alongside that grief and mourning is a painful realization. A realization that my particular experience, my particular grief, my particular loss, doesn't really matter to everyone else. That it's possible to ignore it. To look past it. To write it off. Your experience isn't everyone's. So your own particular experience is just that: yours. "I want you to look at me" is another way of saying, "I want to know that my particular loss matters to you." "I want you to look at me" is another way of saying, "I want to know that my particular loss has significance beyond my own life."

The situation is new. The shootings, the politics, the media, it's all new. But that painful realization, that desire for people to really look at us, to take our griefs and burdens seriously, is ancient.

This week we heard it echoed in yet another story from the Old Testament about covenant. If you take our Old Testament readings for Lent, there are five of them, and line them all up next to each other, you'll notice that they not only have a common theme, which is covenant, but they have a pattern to them as well. In last week's reading about the flood, we were told five times (five times!) that the covenant was between God and "all flesh." Not just Noah. Not just Noah and his descendants. But every living creature on the earth. This week, God's focus gets a little tighter. The covenant isn't between God and "all flesh." It's between God and Abraham and Sarah's descendants. So the old covenant still exists, but God makes a new covenant with one family. Next week, we'll hear the story of God's covenant with the Israelites, one branch of Abraham's descendants. So again, the old covenant still exists, but there's a new covenant for a smaller group of people. And eventually the covenant will get even tighter. God will make a promise with one Israelite family: David's family. The focus of God's promise making gets tighter and tighter until we get to Jesus.

And after Easter, we'll hear about how God's promise made flesh in Jesus, starts to expand. Initially, it's present among the disciples, the people following Jesus. But then it expands to other Jews in Jerusalem. People who didn't know Jesus personally but knew the disciples who did. And then pretty soon it's not just Jews but Gentiles who are part of this new community. And eventually the gospel becomes something not for a select few, but something for everyone. A covenant relationship that's open to "all flesh."

So if you're a visual learner and you want to imagine how this works in your head, it looks like an hourglass tipped on its side. God makes increasingly narrow promises so that a broader group of people will be invited into the covenant. The promises that we hear about this Lent get increasingly limited, increasingly specific, increasingly narrow, but only so they can be just as inclusive, just as all-encompassing, and just as welcoming. All five of the covenants we'll be hearing about this season are different in their own ways. But when you read them next to one another, a

common theme emerges: When God makes a covenant, God uses the particular for the sake of the universal.

In today's reading from Genesis, we hear the story of God's covenant with Abraham. And most commentators will tell you that the covenant involves two things. And both of those things are affirmed in today's reading. The first thing God promises Abraham is descendants. That God will make Abraham the ancestor of a multitude of nations. This, by the way, is what the name "Abraham" means. Just means father of many. And the second thing God promises Abraham and his descendants is land. "I will give to you and to your offspring after you," God says, "the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan."

Those two things are important because they seem like they're always in jeopardy. Abraham would live to a hundred seventy five, and he's ninety in today's story, so he's having something of a midlife crisis. When God first promises Moses the land of Canaan, Moses leaves him home to go settle there. And it isn't long before a famine strikes and they have to leave. So is God really going to give them the land or not? When God promises Abraham and Sarah descendants, the proposition seems ludicrous because they're both in their nineties. When God tells Abraham that Sarah will give birth to his child, Abraham's reaction is not to say thank you or to wonder at God's majesty. No, it's unthinkable. It's absurd. Today's reading ends right before Abraham's response to the promise of kids, which is to fall on the ground laughing. Is God really going to give them kids or not?

But there's a third part of that blessing. Something else that God promises Abraham besides land and descendants. Something more important. God promises that Abraham will be a blessing to the people who come after him. In one of their first conversations, God says that "in you, all the families of the earth will be blessed." And here, God repeats that third blessing, saying, I will be "God to you and your offspring after you." In you, God says, countless other people will be blessed. Abraham is blessed by God so that he can be a blessing to others.

The covenant that God makes with Abraham is not just a covenant with Abraham. It's a covenant reaches beyond Abraham's own life. The land and the descendants are fine and good, but they're really there to ensure that third part. The public part. The relational part. They're there so that Abraham can be a blessing to others. This is why Jews, Christians, and Muslims all consider Abraham to be the "father" of their faiths. Because they're all the spiritual descendants of Abraham and God's promise to him. In Abraham, God uses the particular for the sake of the universal.

This isn't the way most of us are used to thinking. Because so many of us view our relationships with God not as communal, not as shared, not as involving other people, but as private. And so no surprise, we're much more comfortable using the universal for the sake of the particular. That the world exists, the blessings God gives us exist, mostly to affirm what we already think about ourselves. So just get the blessing from God and keep it to yourself. Just give me the land and the descendants. I can do without the blessed to be a blessing stuff.

You can see that kind of thinking at work in many of our churches. George Hunsinger, whose book on the Beatitudes we read together this time last year, calls this kind of thinking in our churches "enclave theology." Enclave theology, he says, is "theology based narrowly in a single tradition that seeks not to learn from other traditions and to enrich them, but instead to topple and defeat them, or at least to withstand them. Enclave theology makes itself look good, at least in its own eyes, by making others look bad."[1]

Maybe you've had an experience with enclave theology. A church that roots for other churches to fail. Or church that is more concerned with private preservation than public witness.

[1] George Hunsigner, *Eucharist and Ecumenism*, 1.

And if you haven't, in which case you've been blessed, then you've certainly experienced that same attitude in any of its other forms. We have enclave communities. Communities that define themselves not by the values that hold them together but by who they exclude. We practice enclave politics. Politics that takes more pleasure in humiliating our opponents than in solving problems. In so many parts of our lives, our default setting is enclave.

And in so many of those enclaves that fill our lives, the vision is always the same. Because the vision is always focused on the past. We build enclaves because deep down, we don't believe in redemption. We subscribe to enclave theology because we don't trust that God is still renewing the church. We build enclave communities because we think the world is only getting worse. And we practice enclave politics because we don't believe other people will ever change their minds.

And it would be possible to imagine Abraham's covenant with God turning into the same thing. For Abraham to have his own land and his own descendants. To have a little Abraham enclave, a little compound, for himself and Sarah. To get away from the world and enjoy their remaining eighty years.

But it's not about the kids. And it's not about the land. It's all about the relationship. Which is why God keeps on making covenants with us. Because God isn't satisfied with leaving us on our own to sort things out. And God isn't content to leave us to our worse angels of our nature. So over and over, again and again, God uses covenants to bring us into relationship, create faith in us, and reorient us toward God's promised future. And, in Jesus, God takes on our particular fears, bears our particular burdens, experiences a particular death, to bring us into God's universal promise of everlasting life.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor