

Rev. Dr. Laurie McKnight

Sermon: August 10, 2025

Text: Genesis 15:1-6, Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

“Our People, Our Places, Our God”

My Aunt Alyce and Uncle David would often worship here in Old Lyme when they were at their summer home in Westbrook. They told me what a fabulous pastor you all had here at FCCOL, and they encouraged me to come and hear Steve. The first time I worshipped here at Old Lyme, a few years ago, Steve began his preaching using a quote from Dante. His preaching blew my mind then, and it continues to blow my mind now. I always want to come back and worship here when I’m not preaching elsewhere – just to stretch my mind, and to reaffirm to myself what preachers are supposed to do. And Carleen and Laura are no slouches, either! All your preachers preach good sermons, and they pray great prayers. This is an inspiring place in which to worship.

When Steve asked me if I would preach here one year ago, last July, I asked him why? I told him, “Your bench is deep.” It’s a baseball reference, meaning, in this case, that the whole team is capable – if Steve’s not here, Carleen is here. If Carleen isn’t here, Laura’s here. But I love how this church takes care of its pastors as well as its people. Pastors get to rest and refresh themselves and take vacation, and at least one pastor remains to attend to pastoral care of the flock while the other pastor is – or the other pastors are – away. You all have a good system.

When I preached here last July, a year ago, I preached as a hospice chaplain, which I most surely am. Steve asked me to preach about death, and I did that. I am well familiar with death. Today I am preaching as a minister, as a pulpit supply pastor. Today I am preaching the kind of sermon I preach whenever I preach anywhere else. Today I am preaching as the Reverend Doctor Laurie McKnight. I am not Steve – much to my great sorrow. I can only aspire to preach like him. One day.

I am a lectionary preacher and Steve is not. Neither type of preacher is good or bad – we each have free choice when writing our sermons. The revised common lectionary is a grouping of scripture lessons that an inter-denominational committee (years ago) has decided go together. Roman Catholic priests today are preaching on the same passages I am – or they can if they want to. Lutheran and Methodist clergy may be preaching on these same passages today also. Or maybe they’re not. It’s not mandatory. The lectionary cycle repeats every 3 years, so that you read through most of the bible regularly.

I like to preach from the lectionary because it encourages me to look at various scripture passages in new ways, at different times. It’s almost like an assignment. I have to find something relevant to say today (or God has to put something in my mind or on my heart – and yours – to encourage my – and your – understanding and interpretation of these texts) – how do we find new meaning today in old, long-existing texts? If I had to pick what scripture to preach from, on my own, every week, I would probably resort to my dozen or so favorite verses. Preaching from the lectionary stretches

me. And sometimes God is so good. (Sometimes? Always!) When I preached here last July, one year ago, one of the lectionary readings for that Sunday was Psalm 23. I was preaching about death, because Steve asked me to, and one of the lectionary readings was something we hear, more often than not, at funerals, at the time of death.

I went to Princeton Theological Seminary and Steve went to Yale Divinity School. The word seminary comes from the same root word as semen, and has to do with seeds. Seminaries plant the seeds and teach the basics of practical pastoring. Divinity schools traffic in divination – the focus is more academic and lofty and theological, and scholars often become teachers of the next generation of preachers and pastors.

I am a Doctor of Ministry – it’s abbreviated D.Min. (capital D capital M and lower case i-n, but those of us with this degree like to say demon D-E-M-O-N – I have my demon!) and Steve has a Ph.D., which makes him a Doctor of Philosophy – and that he surely is! I am more of a working preacher, and Steve is more of a deep thinker and scholar – even a professor, if you will (and I know he has taught at Harvard!). Steve’s mind is creative and is always humming, and able to make connections and associations that I might not make. He links together various ideas and art forms – your whole bench of preachers does this – including other poetry and readings by various authors that don’t detract from the biblical message but instead amplify it and complement it. They are all so good at broadening the message of God’s creation and Christ’s inclusion and the movement of the Holy Spirit throughout.

Our first reading this morning comes from Genesis – and we read about Abram bargaining with God. Contesting God. All Abram wanted was to be a father, and he is not happy that he is not. I’m not sure I realized that Abram wasn’t all that happy to have a son with his wife’s slave. You’ll remember that Hagar, the slave of Abram’s wife Sarai, gave birth to Abram’s first son. Abram says to God, “You have given me no children,” and when Abram says *that*, he already has a son! Abram says, “A slave is to be my heir.” He doesn’t say, “The child of a slave;” he says, “A slave, born in my house.” Imagine fathering a child and considering your own child a slave. Later, God says to Abram that “*This* man shall not be your heir. No one but your *very own issue* will be your heir.” This is Ishmael, son of Hagar, and God gave Abram “permission” to father a child with a woman not his wife (which might be a laughable idea for us even to consider, just like the idea of “biblical marriage” might be laughable for us to consider – but that’s another topic for another day). Ishmael *is* of Abram’s *own issue*, just as much as son #2, Isaac, who has not come along yet, *is* of Abram’s *own issue*. Abram is the one who follows God’s directions so closely that he is willing to kill his son Isaac when God tests him. But Abram gets what he wants, what he asked God for: Isaac grows up and gets married and fathers many children, and Ishmael grows up and gets married and fathers many children. Abram does have many descendants after all, as God promised.

Hagar, Sarai’s slave and Ishmael’s mother, gets to be the first person in the bible – male or female – to name God – to call God’s name, and live. In the very next chapter – in Genesis 16 – Hagar speaks to God when God saves Hagar and Ishmael in the desert after Sarai has banished them because of her jealousy. Ishmael is the father of the Ishmaelites, modern-day Arabs, and Ishmael figures

prominently in the Quran. The Quran tells the story of Abram intending to kill Ishmael at God's direction, to prove his faithfulness. Same story, different son.

I love, though, the relationship that Abram has with God, saying, "What will you give me?" Abram and God talk regularly, and very plainly and frankly together. Abram thinks God has welched on their previous "deal," if you will. Abram has been promised numerous descendants at the time this scripture lesson was written, and yet he says he doesn't have *any*. So he's asking God, in effect, "What will you give me instead? ...Since you haven't come through on that other promise." I wonder if we can think of times when we thought we were owed something from God, that we didn't get, and how demanding we might be in asking for it again, or in asking for something else.

But God says, "No, no, no. You'll get your many descendants." And scripture records that Abram believed God, and God counted Abram as righteous because of his faith in God's word. Do we have that kind of faith in God's word?

Then we move to the New Testament, to our reading from Hebrews. And I want to remind us that a lectionary committee put these two readings together (along with the Psalm that was our call to worship). I have not preached these passages together before, but for some reason they spoke to me this week, and I wanted to explore them together.

Now Abram is called Abraham – he has been changed by his encounters with God. And Sarai, Abraham's wife, is now called Sarah. She is also changed as she goes on this journey of following God along with Abraham. In fact, I love the wording in this passage where it says, "By faith, *with Sarah's involvement*, Abraham received power of procreation even though he was too old, because God considered him faithful who had promised." I love that Sarah is mentioned, and I love that Abraham is regarded as old, just as Sarah is regarded as old. Abraham followed God and went where God sent him and did what God directed, and God blessed Abraham with many descendants.

The book of Hebrews is attributed to the Apostle Paul, and you may have heard or read that the Apostle Paul was not always that kind or generous in his references to or about women. But I'm glad for this Sarah reference here.

There are 14 Pauline letters – there are 14 letters that the Apostle Paul wrote – and they are: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, and Hebrews. Paul wrote to the church in Rome, to the church in Corinth, to the church in Galatia, to the church in Ephesus, to the church in Philippi, to the church in Colossae, and to the church in Thessalonica. And Paul wrote to individuals – to Timothy and to Titus and to Philemon, as well as to the group of people called the Hebrews, which is where we are this morning.

Now this may be interesting to me only, but I always learn so much when I research and write a sermon. The letters of Paul in chronological order, meaning the order in which they were written – oldest to youngest, if you will, which is not the way they are arranged in the bible – is Galatians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Corinthians, Philippians, Romans, Colossians, Philemon, 2 Timothy, Ephesians, Titus, Hebrews, 2 Corinthians, and 1 Timothy.

Of the 14 Pauline epistles, 7 are considered authentic to Paul and are not disputed: Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. Recent scholarship indicates that 7 epistles are of questionable authorship – meaning that Paul may not have written them at all. The books of disputed authorship are Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, and Hebrews – the passage we’re reading this morning – may not have been written by Paul. Does that matter? It might have been written by a student of Paul or an admirer of Paul or “after the style of Paul” we sometimes hear it phrased as. Does it still speak truth to us? Maybe it wasn’t Paul who included that Sarah reference after all.

The word “canon” C-A-N-O-N (1 N in the middle) in clerical and seminary circles refers to the books that make up our bible, and the bible was put together in the way and in the order that it was because of the books (or scrolls) that were most often and most regularly used in the early communities of faith. The bible was also put together by committee, and following many arguments, in the first few centuries after Jesus died. Other scriptural texts – even gospels – were written, but they didn’t make it into the bible – because they weren’t used well or often, and so were not considered part of the canon. I guess authorship is a less important issue – do we care who wrote any particular scripture, if it’s one we use often? If it is well-written and it speaks truth to us, we will want to keep using it, and we will pass it on to subsequent generations.

These two scripture lessons this morning address the familial relationship Abram had with God, and the way Abram remained righteous in following God, so that God blessed Abraham and Sarah with many descendants. Abraham is considered the patriarch of all 3 “People of the Book” – the Jews, the Christians, and the Muslims – all of us adhere to revealed scriptures, some of the same revealed scriptures, and all of us claim Abraham as our forefather in the faith. We read about our ancestors receiving approval through faith. We read about foreign people seeking a homeland. It is in scripture – Ecclesiastes 1:9 – that it says, “There is nothing new under the sun” and that is so true. The bible speaks to us newly every day. Written more than 2000 years ago, by whomever, it still speaks truth to us. We can still learn its lessons. And the person in the pew next to you today may learn a different lesson than the one you’re learning. That’s the power of the Holy Spirit. People are people and God is God. The accoutrements around us may have changed in 2000 years, but people haven’t changed – our motivations and fears and needs and desires have not changed. We still need to have faith and trust in others, and in our God. We need to learn life lessons and have our belief systems ratified.

I will close by saying that Steve and I differ on our opinions of Dante. I am not a fan of Dante, although I am a fan of Steve. I had an impish thought this week and wondered if Dante made any comment on Abraham, and as luck would have it, he did! “In Canto IV of the Inferno, Dante places Abraham in the first circle of Hell, known as Limbo, which houses virtuous pagans and unbaptized infants. Abraham is mentioned alongside other notable figures like Hector, Caesar, and Socrates, who are all considered virtuous but not Christian. Dante’s depiction of Abraham in Limbo reflects his understanding of Old Testament figures within the framework of his Christian worldview.” That is my AI minute for today. So what goes around, comes around. Some of you who love Dante may have missed hearing him referenced while Steve’s been away, so you’re welcome. Or you may be more like me and you may roll your eyes every time you hear Dante’s name mentioned in this

place. But either way, we're family. We are brothers and sisters in Christ. We are part of a loving community, that descended from hundreds of other loving communities. We were foreigners seeking a homeland, and I'm so glad we've found it together. Thanks be to God. Amen.