

## Genesis 17:1-7,15-16 Lent 2

What a couple this Abram and Sarai! Back in Genesis 12 they had left their homeland on nothing but a promise. They had continued to believe in the promise of descendants, “our message to a future we will not see” until now in Chapter 17 and nearly 25 years later; still no nappies to wash or sleepless nights. Our scriptures are honest enough to reveal they were human enough to laugh in derision during those moments when they found it nearly too difficult to sustain hope and trust. Sometimes faith does not look more glamorous and noble than just hanging in there by the ends of your bleeding fingernails. But it is faith.

On this text, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says: “Faith is the ability to live with delay without losing trust in the promise; to experience disappointment without losing hope, to know that the road between the real and the ideal is long and yet be willing to undertake the journey. That was Abraham’s and Sarah’s faith.”

Pam suggested a study/discussion group with the theme of something like how as I have got older, or even more bluntly, as I approach my mortality, how has my faith evolved. What holds me, what disappoints me, what have I let go. what has been wrenched from me and what have I decided must never ever be given up?

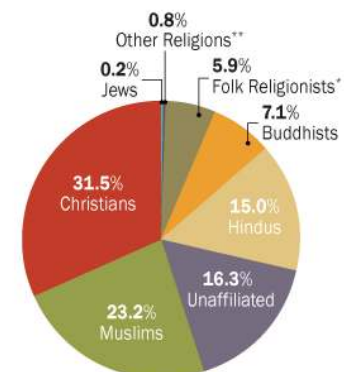
And so it was with the honoured and revered father and mother of the three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. “the friend of God” Muslims call Abraham. “Ibrahim Al Khalil”.

Abraham and Sarah are the revered Mother/Father in the faith to over half the world’s population.

### Major religious groups

- Christianity (31.1%)
- Islam (24.9%)
- Irreligion (15.6%)
- Hinduism (15.2%)
- Buddhism (6.6%)
- Folk religions (5.6%)

**Size of Major Religious Groups, 2010**  
Percentage of the global population



\*Includes followers of African traditional religions, Chinese folk religions, Native American religions and Australian aboriginal religions.

\*\*Includes Bahai's, Jains, Sikhs, Shintoists, Taoists, followers of Tenrikyo, Wiccans, Zoroastrians and many other faiths.  
Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life •  
Global Religious Landscape, December 2012

**We Jews, Christians and Muslims, all together members of the Abrahamic faith are unfortunately better at focussing upon what divides us than what joins us. Wars have raged over who is the inheritor of the covenant. The linking of the notion of covenant, the elect and the Promised Land has been the basis of much of the tensions still raging today in the Middle East.**

**We must without averting our eyes face the dilemma of a promise that involves entry into another's land. The Promised Land was an occupied land. Despite the fiction of Terra Nullius Australia was an occupied land. We are still dealing with these situation thousands of years later in the case of Israel/Palestine and hundreds of years later in case of First and Second Nations in Australia. But let us just pause to reflect how each of those hurling rockets and bombs at each in Gaza can say, I am a believer and put my trust in the God of father Abraham and mother Sarah.**

**Abram when he was 99 had already been waiting for 25 years or so for a child with Sarai, when he once again hears the word of the Lord. Abram, walk before me and be blameless. Well at 99 years of age any walking is looking pretty good. . At 99 Abraham, as he is now to be known, could be excused for struggling to do much at all by this age. His reaction is to fall upon his face. We are not told what caused this falling down. Terrified, grateful, definitely overwhelmed in some way. All good qualities to foster. I mean when you get older you do sometimes do a bit of falling down; we have had our share of it in this congregation; not always out of awe and reverence but because you kind of expect things will wear out. I witnessed this in person just on Monday – out on the footpath in my street in Footscray. My neighbour's parents – in their nineties – live in a house at the end of the street and go for a walk together twice a day. It is lovely to see them step in step and she always puts her arm through his and with their sticks they hobble up the street. On Monday she caught her foot on an edge of the gutter and tumbled down and because their arms were linked he had no choice but to follow her down onto the footpath. He got to his feet and together we were able to lift this wife up and they were both OK and continued into their driveway a little slower but in one piece.**

**At this age you certainly don't expect to be launching into whole new stages of life and making covenant. This theme of covenant that we met in last week's story of Noah and the ark and the animals and the rainbow at the end of that story which was the sign of the covenant God entered into with the whole of the creation.**

**Covenant is an agreement, but even more importantly, a relationship, entered into between two parties. Richer than merely a contract, because in a contract if you fail to keep your side of the bargain then I am released from my obligations. In a covenant you are bound to the other party. What happens to them will inevitably and deeply and personally affect you. All sorts of**

individuals and groups could make covenant in the ancient world. But when God makes covenant, wow, that is big, that is lasting, nothing can break that.

Marriage is probably our most visible and experienced form of covenant. Our UCA wedding service explicitly talks of entering into the covenant of marriage. Sadly, we know how us frail, sinful people are not able to keep covenant, despite our best efforts sometimes. That is the reason the Roman Catholic church does not acknowledge divorce and remarriage because it is modelled upon, and is meant to be a reflection of God's covenant, and more specifically the relationship between Christ and the Church. In the UCA we say something like Yes, that is true but it not realistic or helpful, to say that frail and sinful human beings must carry the full weight of the inviolable covenant of God in relationships – it will crush them. We acknowledge the breakdown, the failure of a human covenant relationship and in the spirit of the gospel seek forgiveness and a possibly new start. I have some personal experience of this having been married to another minister and divorced and now remarried.

The first covenant was with all creation, the one that had the rainbow as its sign, that no more will the flood waters be unleashed. This is the covenant we must fulfil or we shall surely all perish as we bob in the ever warming ark we call earth. Now with Abraham and Sarah, the sign of covenant is circumcision, (yes, terribly sexist I know) revealed in a few verses we skipped over today in our lectionary. The hope of this covenant is many descendants who will be innumerable and be united in common praise of the Creator. Again a covenant we humans must fulfil lest we destroy ourselves by turning upon our kindred. These are timely stories we read through lent.

So this covenant is a living thing. It lives because God lives.

And again we hear the Lenten call, Be ready to leave behind so much you value, take up your cross and follow. These are not easy things, these are not comfortable things. Jesus does not glorify suffering, does not seek it; in fact pleads with God if there is any other way we can find to do this then lets, for God's sake, go down that path. But if not then let us not flee the inevitable suffering that will come our way as the price of being true to God, to our selves, to the way of covenant. Let us face it, enter into it with faith that this way will carry us to Life, for it is the way of Jesus

Not our faith that is the powerful force in all this but the one to whom faith directs us, connects us. In that immortal phrase that appears in the Basis of Union, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.