

March 17, 2019 (Journey worship)

THEME: Surrender

TEXT: [Genesis 15: 1–6, 12–15, 18](#)

TITLE: Delayed Promises

By the Rev. Patrice Fowler-Searcy

In 1948, much to the surprise of the English, who had dominated the government in South African since the 1800s, an Afrikaner-led government was elected, despite being only 12% of the South African population. After their election win, Afrikaners proceeded to enforce racial separation that they perceived to be mandated by God. But members of the black African political parties were quietly waiting and actively mobilized to work for freedom and three black, South African youth who had been educated in mission schools and qualified as lawyers by the University of South Africa, via correspondence courses, were elected to the national committee of the African National Congress. Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Oliver Tambo began to actively oppose Apartheid.

Arrested for treason in 1961, Mandela was acquitted of those charges. But arrested again in 1962 for illegally leaving the country, Mandela was convicted and sentenced to five years at the Robben Island Prison. Charged and tried for sabotage in 1964, Mandela was convicted and sentenced to life in prison. Finally released from prison in 1990, Mandela spent twenty-seven years of his life waiting, hoping, praying, and never wavering from the belief that he and all persons of African descent were born to live in liberty, equality and justly in their native land.

Abram had surrendered everything, leaving the land of his ancestors and his father's house at God's command and the promise of blessings and prosperity. Famine pushed Abram out of the Negeb and he traveled to Egypt where he prospered and left with cattle, silver and gold. Abram gave his nephew Lot the first right of refusal of land to settle, and God promised to give Abram all the land he could see. When Lot became a prisoner of war, Abram rescued him and relinquishing the gains from his conquest Abram, was blessed by King Melchizdek. Abram was obedient, and courageous, yet humble and faithful in his comportment. At the age of 75, Abram and Sarai had not received what they desired most, they remained childless. God's promise of a child and heir had not come to fruition.

Abram complained to God, what will you give me, for I remain childless and the heir of my house is my servant? The reward that Abram sought was an heir, someone to carry the family into the future – God had promised Abram he would be the father of nations, but how would that happen without the promised child. In the words of Billy Dee Williams in the movie, *Lady Sings the Blues*: "success is nothing, without someone to share it with." Abram had settled in a land with God's promise of ownership, he had gained abundant riches and blessings, but all those things were meaningless without an heir.

We know that Abram and Sarai eventually took matters into their own hands. Sarai gave her husband to her maidservant and a child was born. But he was not the child of the

promise. I've heard it said, and know it to be true. There's nothing worse than waiting on God, than wishing later on that you had. When we get ahead of God and take divine matters into our own hands, disasters can occur.

But waiting on God, doesn't mean we have to do so without questions or asking God for clarification. Abram asked God: when will your promise of an heir be made manifest. How long must I wait? God reassures Abram. *Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.* Then God said to Abram, *'So shall your descendants be.'* And Abram believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness. Being righteous and faithful before God does not mean that we can't call God on God's promises; God we believe, help our unbelief.

I imagine that many a slave in the United States and other countries looked to the heavens many nights, for hundreds of years and asked how long Lord must we endure this brutal, inhumane treatment, separated from our land, our family, our traditions and culture, seemingly from you God – how long? I imagine many a parent recently arrived in this country, crossing over the southern border desiring safety, shelter, work and a livable wage, but instead their children were taken, has looked to the heavens and asked God, how long will I be separated from my child, how long God, how long. I imagine that many indigenous, native South Africans looked to the heavens and cried out: how long God will we be mistreated, segregated, jailed and denied our inalienable rights by a government that legislates Apartheid, how long God, how long? How long, O God, how long will people be maligned, terrorized, murdered and hated because of the color of their skin, their faith tradition, religious beliefs or heritage. How long, O God, how long will people be abused and neglected by people they trust and have pledged their love and lives to? How long, O God, how long?

God assured Abram that indeed, he would be the father of nations and his off-spring would inhabit the land. But God also warned Abram that his children would be aliens in the land and would be enslaved, and oppressed, but God would bring judgment on the nation they serve and they would come out with great possessions.

Beloved, God didn't promise us that we would live lives of ease or that things would always be just, or equal or easy or equitable; God didn't promise us that we wouldn't experience setbacks, setups or upsets; God didn't promise that the sun would shine every day or that things would always go our way. Langston Hughes in his poem entitled Mother to Son wrote:

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.
But all the time

I've been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now—
For I've still goin', honey,
I've still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

Indigenous people all over this planet have suffered the degradation, inhumane treatment, enslavement and disenfranchisement of colonialism, life for them and us ain't been no crystal stair, but we still climbin'. People traveling across our southern borders only to be separated from their children and imprisoned testify that life for them in their homelands and now in this land, ain't been no crystal stair, but they still climbin'. People who labor and aren't treated with respect, fairly compensated or valued contest: life for me ain't been no crystal stair, but we still climbin'. Nelson Mandela and native South African's declare: life for me ain't been no crystal stair, but we still climbin' and in 1994 Apartheid was abolished.

The thing that all these folks and many more know is that promises just like justice delayed, doesn't mean that promises or justice will be denied. Abram and Sarai did conceive and became the mother and father of nations; Apartheid was overturned in South Africa and the indigenous people gained full citizenship and inclusion. And even though it appears we are not making progress in our country against racist, inequality, the "just us system," irrational, erratic and mean-spirited government and institutions, God is yet in control and we can rest on the promises of God because Jesus came and died on the cross, was resurrected and ascended into heaven and we anticipate he will come again, so that all will have life, and life in abundance on this side of heaven. Beloved, many can attest that "Life ain't been no crystal stair case, but we still climbin'" and like Abram, we're still counting the stars because Jesus is the embodiment of God's promise made and God's promise kept.

Amen.