

Denying Me; Embracing Us

Norwalk Christian Church, March 1, 2015, Lent 2, Year B

Early in the morning, this past Friday, Netflix, the streaming video service, released Season 3 of its hit show *House of Cards*. This is a show that has made TV history, whatever that means. It's the first show released by a streaming, internet service and not a TV network to have won awards and reached broad appeal. And it is wildly popular.

House of Cards tells the story of Frank Underwood, a Congressman from Georgia, played by Kevin Spacey, who rises through the political ranks using every means necessary--every means. Underwood will blackmail, threaten, mame and even murder. Every action he takes is carefully calculated to take him further up the ladder of political power. And don't get in his way, or he will, quite literally, push you out of the way.

I can hear Frank Underwood's laugh, as he heard the scripture reading this morning, Jesus' call for his disciples to deny themselves, take up their crosses and follow him. Denying one's self is not the Underwood way, and it will get you nowhere in the cut-throat game of political power.

To be honest, he is one of the most vial, inhumane, empty political characters ever portrayed on American film, and I'm a huge fan! I'm not proud of this, but it's Lent, so let that be my lenten confession, and I will make atonement by binge-watching the new season 3 this afternoon.

A Wall Street Journal column¹ this week looked at all these hugely popular political shows, like *House of Cards*, *Scandal*, *Homeland* and *Veep*, and asked what such shows say about the state of American politics. Each show is filled with despicable, egomaniacal characters running our country. Gone are the days of idealistic shows like *West Wing*, the article says. What does it say of us, that when we now imagine our political leaders on screen, we are drawn to despicable, Machiavellian characters like Frank Underwood. One would hope that our real life politics is not so cynical and jaded.

It's probably good that we read the story of old Father Abraham and Mother Sarah, for we might need to dig that far back into human history to find characters worth emulating.

When we first meet Abram and Sarai, as they were originally named, they are certainly a power couple who have already achieved great wealth and fame in the ancient world. Then God shows up and changes it all.

Our text today picks up in the middle of their story, which began in chapter 12 of Genesis. Then, God shows up to Abram, and tells him "Go from your country and your

¹ <http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2015/02/25/house-of-cards-scandal-and-the-state-of-politics-on-tv/>

kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing."

Blessed to be a blessing--this is God's offer to Abram, and he and Sarai take God up on it. They had not yet heard Jesus' call to deny themselves and follow him, but their lives give us a picture of what this looks like, as they leave behind all that they had known in life, and follow God into the unknown.

Their journey is not an easy one. Their lives are threatened. They almost give up. They are far from perfect. There's deceit and conniving, for sure. They are promised by God that they will have a child in their old age, a child that will lead to a new nation, yet after years of waiting, Abram takes matters into his own hands, and impregnates Sarai's maidservant, Hagar, who gives birth to Ishmael. Eventually, Saria does become pregnant, and has their son, Isaac.

It's no *House of Cards* or *Scandal*, but it is certainly good drama.

I'm sure they became wearisome on their long journey, which is why we have a story like this one. Right in the middle of their journey, God checks in with them, reminding them of all God has promised. And as a sign of God's promise to them, God changes their names. Abram becomes Abraham. Sarai becomes Sarah.

This is not the life they thought they would live. They are not the people they thought they would become. Following after God has changed them, as they deny themselves, and journey into God's call on their lives to be a blessing to the world.

Thousands of years later, Jesus calls his disciples together and says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross and follow me."

I must admit, when I hear Jesus say, "Deny yourself," I think of all the many things I need to give up. Particularly this time of year, during Lent, as we look at our hearts and our waistlines, and know that we need to lose some things.

Deny yourself calories! Deny yourself pleasure! Deny yourself excess! Deny yourself your humanity! This is what I hear when I hear Jesus say, "Deny yourself," and, frankly, it doesn't sound like a lot of fun.

It also doesn't sound a lot like Jesus. Jesus said, "I have come that you may have abundant life!" He was called a drunkard and a glutton, not because he was always denying himself, but because he was always indulging himself. Everywhere you look in the Gospels, you see Jesus at a party.

So when Jesus asks us to deny ourselves, what's he asking?

One of the commentaries I read this week, an article by Karoline Lewis, says this about Abraham and Sarah:

“...[Abraham and Sarah do] ‘deny themselves’ just as Jesus asks. But it’s not a denial of the self. It’s a denial of remaining by themselves. That is, they deny a life that is autonomous, secured, enclosed, safe, and just the two of them, for a life that propels them into relationship -- with God and with a future realized by abounding relationship.

“I wonder if this is exactly what Jesus means.”²

Denying a life that is autonomous, secured, enclosed, safe, and embracing a life of relationship with God and with others. I like that.

Or, to put it more simply, Denying “myself” to embrace “ourselves.”

This is certainly not the way of our world. If that article I read last week from the Wall Street Journal is right, and our favorite TV shows reveal just how jaded and cynical we really are, then we are in trouble. Of course, our favorite TV shows are only a reflection of a broader problem in our culture. Everything about our life together seems to be so insular and self-seeking. Preserve me, no matter the cost to the other.

We fear the other, be they a muslim or gay or an immigrant or the other side of the political aisle. If they were in charge, they’d ruin our country! We lock our doors and our hearts, fearing what might happen if someone broke in. You can’t be too careful! The other is someone to be feared! They may blow you up, or give you a disease, take all your possessions, or destroy your country!

If you want to save your life, you better protect yourselves!

Yet here is Jesus, inviting us on this journey of letting go of our self-protection. “If any want to become my followers,” he says to us, “let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

This is Christ’s invitation, and it is an invitation to a life ruled by love and not fear.

The name of my favorite show, *House of Cards*, suggests that this life Frank Underwood is building, his relentless pursuit of power at all costs, is really just a house of cards. Eventually, it will all fall down, and he will have nothing left.

At least, that’s what I hope will happen. As much as I like Underwood’s character, he better not win.

² “A Different Kind of Denial”, Karoline Lewis, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3542>

I'd rather the story of Abraham and Sarah, these heroes of our faith--and all God's faithful after them--who left themselves behind, and followed God on this journey from self-reliance and autonomy, into community. The journey from "me" to "us."

This is the journey of a disciple of Christ, and this is the only journey to life. This is God's plan for saving the world. Our lives are not our own. Our lives are not meant to be saved. Our lives are meant to be lost in pursuit of love and beauty and truth and community--which is to say, following after Christ.

May we deny ourselves all that would keep us from being "ourselves". Our self-reliance, our fear, our security...and may we follow after Jesus on this beautiful journey of giving up ourselves, for the sake of blessing the world.

Amen.