

A Promise is a Promise! Sermon for Feb.25 the 2nd Sunday in Lent. (based on Genesis 17, 1-7, 15-16)

Our reading from the Hebrew Bible, or the Old Testament, is the story of the covenant between the Lord and Abram and Sarai. This is the third time the Lord has appeared to Abram, but this time the Lord says: “I am God Almighty.’ Serve me faithfully and live a blameless life.” (*Gen. 17.1 NLT*) God begins this divine appearance or ‘theophany’ to use religious term with an explanation as to just who Abram is dealing with. God calls Godself “*El Shaddai*”, which translated from the ancient Hebrew means ‘God Almighty’. For the first time God uses this name, *El Shaddai*, which can also mean “God of the Mountains”—making it clear that this is the God who is the Creator of the heavens and the earth, the Almighty God, the God of all the gods.¹ Remember in these ancient days there were many tribal religions each with their own deities or gods. The God with whom Abram is dealing is the one and only God, the Almighty One. And *El Shaddai* wants to make a covenant, an agreement with Abram and Sarai. God promises Abram that he will be the ancestor of a multitude of nations, and to seal the deal, so to speak, changes Abram’s name to reflect this promise; Abram means ‘exalted ancestor’, **Abraham** means ‘ancestor of a multitude’. Now Abram’s lawfully wedded wife Sarai, who has yet to have any children, will be the mother of the child God is promising. God also gives her a new name -- Sarah, reflective of God’s promise to her as the mother of this new nation that is to come into being. This story is a pivotal moment in the history of God’s chosen people, and we know that because the Lord gives everyone in the story a new name, including Godself. The new names are an important, “the new names are linked to the covenant God establishes with Abraham”² and Sarah. This signifies a new beginning for all of them, a fresh start, a new vision, with a new purpose, in a new direction. Even though Sarah was about 90 years old and Abraham 100, God has promised/covenanted/contracted with them, that their progeny would begin a new nation. This was so unbelievable to them, at their age; that they each laughed at the idea of having a child. But God promised, and God delivered on God’s promise, and in due time, their son Isaac is born. Isaac is the name God chose for their son. Isaac, in ancient Hebrew, means laughter—who says God doesn’t have a sense of humour!

Also of interest in this scripture reading is the use of the word covenant—it’s repeated -- 4 times in 5 verses. Repetition is a tool used in biblical stories for emphasis, to tell the listener – ‘Hey! pay attention here!’ Covenant in Hebrew is *bē’rîth*, and came to mean “that which bound two parties together.”³

Covenants, by definition then, are formal and bi-lateral agreements, a contract, treaty or legal agreement usually between a superior and an inferior party, with the superior party establishing the bond with the inferior party.⁴ Covenants were in common use in the ancient world, often as a bond between two individuals or even between tribes of people. And generally each party had terms, had contractual obligations they were bound to.

¹ Ibid

² Craig Kocher, Pastoral Perspective Commentary for Gen 17: 1-7, 15-16, Lent 2; in Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 2 p. 52

³ Bromley, 790

⁴ Coogan, 22 Hebrew Bible

The first explicit covenant we find in the Bible is God's covenant with Noah and his family, which was our story last week. God says to Noah: *"I am confirming my covenant with you. Never again will floodwaters kill all living creatures; never again will a flood destroy the earth."*(Genesis 9: 11 nlt) And the sign of the covenantal promise, "the seal on the deal" so to speak? The rainbow, of course, God hangs up his bow, like a warrior hangs up his bow at the end of a war, never again would God destroy the inhabitants of God's creation with a flood. This, God tells Noah, is an everlasting covenant. Yet this deal, this covenant, is really one-sided, God doesn't ask for anything from humanity in return from humanity's side of the contract.

Now, the covenant between the Lord and Abraham and Sarah and their descendants goes a step farther, a more complete and explicit contract you could say, and the name changing signifies its importance, a new era has begun. Abraham and Sarah's offspring will become a multitude of nations; they will become God's chosen people, a holy nation. This too is an everlasting covenant.

In the scripture reading as it was read today we skipped over the details of the covenantal agreement, the fine print in the contract you could say. *El Shaddai*, the Almighty God will provide their offspring with all the land of Canaan in perpetuity, and will always be their God, the one to protect, guide and forgive them. (Gen 17.8). In exchange, each male will be circumcised, a bodily sign of promises made one to the other.

So what's the purpose of us today, looking back at these ancient stories and talking about all these ancient promises? Well, we can trace God's promises, God's faithfulness to God's people throughout history as we read the Old Testament stories; beginning with the Creator and Adam and Eve in the garden, through to Noah, the ancestor of Abraham, the father of Isaac and grandfather of Jacob renamed Israel, who fathered the twelve tribes of Israel, from whom came the great King David, and down the successive generations to Jesus, God come to earth—the one who brings us the new covenant. The stories of the bible are the history of God's grace, love and care throughout the ages. These are the stories of how the people of the covenant fall away from God's ways; they do their own thing, live their lives the way they want to, to fulfill their own wants, never mind what God's will for them is. And not surprisingly, often as a result, they find themselves in really difficult and challenging life situations, individually, as a group or tribe, and as their numbers grow, their collective sinfulness grows and leads to further alienation from God's ways as a larger society and even as a country. Hmmm, sounds familiar doesn't it? When we fall away from God's good desires for us, and do our own thing, it breaks our connection with God. And God seems absent for us. And we feel the loss, although many don't realize what it is that they have lost, and what that feeling of emptiness is—it's the absence of God in our lives.

In a sacred covenant, a covenant between God and humanity, the terms and relationship go beyond, go deeper than a standard legal agreement between two people. A religious covenant is a sacred agreement, humans covenanting with God, the Almighty One, the maker of creation. The Lord God Almighty is making promises with the people God created. This is not something to be taken lightly; not the kind of contract easily gotten out of, not like you can pay the interest penalty and you each go your separate ways. Think for a minute, a contract with God -- it is quite amazing! It is a sign of God's blessing, God's love, upon God's people, that God wants to be in a binding

relationship with us, God's people, even knowing how incredibly fallible, how imperfect we are. Pretty high risk contract from God's perspective, wouldn't you say? What a God we have; a giver of everlasting grace and since the beginning of time! God tells Abram that by walking in faith in God, his sins will be forgiven. What wonderful reassurance! We have a God who doesn't hold grudges, but forgives those who believe and walk in faith with the Lord! And it's never too late to turn things around, never too late to receive God's forgiveness and blessing. Look how old Abraham and Sarah were!

God's covenant with Abraham and Sarah continues with us--to this very day, all these millennia later. The capstone of God's covenant is in Jesus, God come to earth. Remember the words Christ gave us at the Last Supper: "After supper he took the cup of wine; and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them and said, "Drink this, all of you; this is the blood of the new covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins."⁵ The sacred covenant between God with Abraham and Sarah remains. We make our promises to God in the waters of baptism and through the promises made at our baptism and we are reminded of them every time we renew those baptismal promises. And as Christians we know that God's forgiving, caring, loving, extravagant grace is still present to us through the cross and resurrection of Jesus. Thanks be to our amazing God! Amen.

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⁵ BAS Eucharistic Prayer 3