

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

¹ When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. ² Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers." ³ Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, ⁴ "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. ⁵ No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. ⁶ I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. ⁷ I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.

¹⁵ God also said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. ¹⁶ I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her."

Many of us sacrifice like the little girl who, after hearing a Lenten sermon on sacrifice, decided to give up something for this special religious season. Her mother said, "You know, it should be something that you really like." The little girl thought for a moment and then said, with a twinkle in her eye, "Well, mom, I guess it will have to be Sunday School, cause I like that better than anything else."

Here we are on the second Sunday of Lent. Let me ask you to consider: how have things been going for you over the past week as you continued your Lenten journey towards the cross? Have you given it any thought or did the whole idea of Lent escape your thoughts since last Sunday?

If you gave up something for Lent, have you been able to stick to it? Have you thought about why you gave that something up for Lent? Is it because it's the thing to do? Was it for personal gain, or was it so you would be reminded of Christ's journey and sacrifice?

Maybe you spent some time reflecting more on the lessons I presented in last week's sermon from the story of Noah. We considered the destructive effects of sin and the deep hurt God felt because of humanity's sinfulness. We admitted the unfortunate reality that the flood did not get rid of sin; so, God changed his mind and made a promise—with the rainbow as a reminder of his promise—to never destroy the earth with a flood again.

Therefore, we found that the story of Noah points us to the cross of Jesus and the grace and mercy we find there, saving us from sin. This is the message of hope the church, of which each of us is a part, needs to take to the world. Maybe you spent some time last week thinking on these things.

As we continue our spiritual journey towards the cross of Jesus, this week, I want to give you a few things to think about from the story of Abraham and Sarah. The story of Abram begins in Chapter 12 of Genesis. It's there that we learn that Abram was a man who tried to be obedient to God.

God appeared to Abram one day and made a covenant with Abram. God said he would give Abram many descendants and they would become a great nation—if Abram would trust God and leave the comforts of the familiar place he called home to venture to an unknown land that God would show him. God was asking Abram to be obedient, and Abram was. That's not to say there were not any serious challenges along the way, but even so, Abram remained faithful to God.

This morning I read a very small but important portion of the story of Abram. We find here that God is repeating his covenant to Abram. Twice before God mentioned this covenant—first in Genesis 12 and later in Genesis 15. But this time God moved ahead with a part of his covenant that was in the waiting.

Establishing a covenant is different than making a promise as God did with Noah when he sent the rainbow. You can make a promise without involving another person. You can make a promise without anyone else knowing about it.

A covenant is different from a contract. It is not a legal document. A contract is based on mistrust where the parties try to protect their personal interests. With a contract, one must always be careful to read the "fine print."

In contrast, a covenant is a complete giving of yourself to the other person with absolutely no concern for yourself at all. In a covenant relationship, your concern and focus is on the other person, not on yourself. Establishing a covenant, however, involves two or more parties making an agreement with each other around certain issues by creating a bond—an intimate bond, a special relationship.

Rev. Isaac Butterworth from the First Presbyterian Church of Levelland, tells this story about a man in his church, the owner of a local business and a highly intentional Christian. Rev. Butterworth says:

"The apostle Paul once said of himself that he bore 'on [his] body the marks of Jesus' (Gal. 6:17). Well, this man bore the marks of Jesus on his life.

"His wife was the most annoying woman I have ever known. She was chronically ill, and her sickness had embittered her spirit. She demanded almost all of this man's time and energy, and she was never grateful for a single thing he did for her. She complained about life, and she complained about him.

For his part—I don't know how he did it—but he remained gentle and serene, and he had the utmost patience with this woman. He never spoke ill of her. He never sighed under the burden of her criticism. He was truly a man of God. He had an intimacy with God that was not showy but nevertheless evident. If life had not rewarded him with outward happiness, he was deeply and inwardly joyful. God was his 'portion,' as the Bible says (e.g., Lam. 3:24; Ps. 16:5; 73:26), and he was satisfied.

"How could he do this? How could he be so patient and kind and committed to the welfare of his wife despite her ingratitude? I'll tell you: he was in covenant with his wife, but he was also in covenant with God. And here's what I learned from him. This man partnered with God in his own process of dedication.

"Now, let me tell you what I mean. This man's highest interest was not in being happy in some conventional way. No. Instead, the longing of his heart was to be the kind of person God wanted him to be. And God has to work on a person to make them like he wants them to be. And what this man did is: he yielded to God's program of overhaul in his life.

"Verse four of the great hymn, 'How Firm a Foundation' says, 'When through fiery trials thy pathways shall lie, my grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply; the flame shall not hurt thee; I only design thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.'

"That's what this man wanted. He wanted his dross, his personal rubbish consumed; he wanted his unloving tendencies to be burned in the fire of affliction if need be, and his gold refined, his character refashioned to be like that of his Lord, who 'loved the church and gave himself up for her.'"

When we are in covenant with God, we engage in an intimate relationship—so intimate that it changes us. Evidence that we are in covenant with God should be apparent by the way it changes us. It's not a change that we force; for example, going to church doesn't make anybody a Christian any more than taking a wheelbarrow into a garage makes it an automobile. Instead the change that we experience when we are in covenant with God is an inward, spiritual change—a change that happens because the Holy Spirit inspires and shapes the changes. The changes become who we are.

God signified the change in Abram by changing his name from Abram to Abraham; and he changed Abraham's wife's name from Sarai to Sarah. They had become new people because of their covenant with God. They stepped out on a journey to lead God's people just as God called them to do.

There's an important ingredient we take to this covenant with God and that is faith. If we are to have an intimate relationship with God that goes deep enough to change us, we need to have faith in God. The Bible tells us that, in faith, Abraham stepped out in obedience to lead God's people without knowing where they were to go, yet trusting God to lead the way.

But there was another piece to God's side of the covenant. God said to Abraham, "No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you." This is not the first time God told Abraham that he would be the father of many nations; but up until this point, Abraham and Sarah still had no children, and they were far beyond childbearing age.

Abraham had faith that somehow God would keep this part of the covenant. Yes, Abraham and Sarah may have thought it was comical when God told them that now was the time Sarah would become pregnant, but Abraham still had faith in God. His faith looked beyond the immediate circumstances of his life. His faith gave him encouragement and perseverance for the future—a future in which he trusted God to always keep his side of the covenant and love him and lead him.

When we are in covenant with God, our faith looks beyond our current circumstances; and we trust that God will have grace and mercy on us when we sin, that He will always love us and will always be with us to guide us. Our faith in God gives us hope for a better day. Abraham and Sarah had faith and did go on to have a son of their own—Isaac.

Maybe at this time, you are wondering exactly what is this covenant we have with God? To explain this, we need to first understand that there was an Old Covenant and there is a New Covenant. Abraham, Moses, and Jeremiah—all those people we read about in the Old Testament—were under the Old Covenant. The New Covenant arrived with Jesus.

The New Covenant (or New Testament) is the promise that God makes with humanity that He will forgive sin and restore fellowship with those whose hearts are turned toward Him. Jesus Christ is the mediator of the New Covenant, and His death on the cross is the basis of the promise (Luke 22:20). The New Covenant was predicted while the Old Covenant was still in effect—the prophets Moses, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel all allude to the New Covenant.

The Old Covenant that God had established with His people required strict obedience to the Mosaic Law. Because the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23), the Law required that Israel perform daily sacrifices in order to atone for sin. But Moses, through whom God established the Old Covenant, also anticipated the New Covenant. In one of his final addresses to the nation of Israel, Moses looks forward to a time when Israel would be given "a heart to understand" (Deuteronomy 29:4, ESV). Moses predicts that Israel would fail in keeping the Old Covenant

(verses 22–28), but he then sees a time of restoration (30:1–5). At that time, Moses says, “The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live” (verse 6). The New Covenant involves a total change of heart so that God’s people are naturally pleasing to Him.

God keeps his side of the covenant of love, grace, and forgiveness with us because we mean that much to him. That leaves us then to decide whether we want to be in covenant with God—a covenant that brings us into an intimate relationship with God, a covenant that changes us for the better—maybe not the easiest way to live, but a better way to live—and a covenant that strengthens our faith leaving us with hope and peace for the future. It’s really all up to us. What have you decided? Amen.