

LIFE IN CHRIST: LIFE IN COVENANT

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Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

Next Sunday, I will begin leading a three-week long Inquirers Class. This class is for those people who are interested in becoming members of this congregation. In the class, we will cover church history, theology, government, and more. In fact, anyone is welcome to attend if you would like to learn more about the Presbyterian Church. If all goes according to plan, the class will be received into membership on Easter Sunday. I believe seven people have signed up for this class so far.

As I have been thinking about this class, I've been rolling the question of membership around in my mind. What does it mean to be a member of a Presbyterian Church? In actuality, that question is pretty easy to answer. It is covered in our Book of Order. (If you don't know about the Book Order then you need to attend my class.) The Book of Order has a section called Marks of Membership. Here, you will find eleven expectations for the membership of a congregation. For example, the first is 'proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ to the world through your words and your actions.' Other marks talk about 'participating in the life and worship of a congregation, lifting one another up in prayer, mutual concern, and active support, studying Scripture, supporting the ministry of the church through the giving of money, time, and talents. There are other Marks of Membership and I would encourage you to review them.

However, beyond membership in the church is a more fundamental question, What are the marks of being a Christian? What does it mean to live a life in Christ? From now until Easter, I will address this question with the scripture readings associated with Lent and Easter. I will explore the Christian life. What is it that sets our life apart from the rest of the world? What defines us as Christian?

The obvious answer is to be a Christian means that one has been baptized and is a member of a local congregation. But I want to go deeper than that. Lent is meant to be a time to reflect on our faith. So, let's use it for that.

I am starting this sermon series with this reading from the fifteenth chapter of Genesis.ⁱ It's a rather odd reading, isn't it.

The book of Genesis begins with the account of Creation (two accounts, actually). It then moves to the story of the first woman and man and their fall from grace. The story expands to include their descendants and concludes with the account of the great flood which we understand to be God's rebooting of a sinful creation.

At the end of the Genesis Chapter 11, we are introduced to Abram and Sarai. Later, we will come to know them as Abraham and Sarah. God has called this couple to leave their home in Ur and travel to a distant land that God will show them. As part of this agreement, God offers a covenant with Abram and Sarai.

It is important to understand the idea of a covenant. We tend to associate a covenant as being like a contract. But they are two different things. A contract is an agreement between two parties for the exchange of goods and/or services. Think of an employment contract, or the mortgage contract you created with your bank to buy a house. A contract is an agreement between two parties.

A covenant is different. A contract is obligator—an obligation between two equal parties. The covenants we find in scripture are of a promissory nature, and, most importantly, are between parties with unequal levels of power. In this case, God and humans. A covenant is usually one-sided. It is initiated by the greater power. In Genesis, God approaches Abram and Sarai and tells them, *Go from your country and your 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. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed* (Gen. 12:1-3). Abram and Sarai make the journey as God directed. In the process they become wealthy with animals and servants and possessions. But there is one thing they lack—children. God promised them that they would become the ancestors of a *great nation*, and yet without heirs, that does not look likely. Maybe God chose the wrong people. If you want a nation of descendants then you need to a strong start. God should have chosen someone like that Dugger family over in Arkansas that has 19 kids. But instead he chose an aging, childless couple from Ur.

Today, we find ourselves in Chapter 15 and Abram and Sarai are still childless, and they are not getting any younger. God approaches Abram in a vision saying, *Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward will be very great*. God is reminding Abram that God is still with him. God is like a shield protecting Abram in battle. What Abram will receive will be very great, indeed.

Abram then points out to God his quite visible lack of descendants. This would seem to be the monkey wrench in the grand scheme. God says, *Abram, what you will receive will be great*. And Abram says, *O Lord God, what will you give me? I am still childless and the heir of my house is Eliezar of Damascus*. Now, if you are scratching your head over this name Eliezar of Damascus, don't fret. You are in good company. No one knows who this is. It may be a servant in Abram's household, but it is more likely that the original text is garbled and some early scribe figured, 'well, this looks like it could Eliezer.' Abram is concerned that a slave born in his home will be his heir. But God assures Abram that his own child, born to him and Sarai, will be the rightful heir. Then God directs Abram to go outside and look at

the night sky. *Count the stars, if you are able*, God says. *That is how many descendants you shall have.* —as many as the stars in the sky.

And then we come to one of the pivotal verses in all of scripture. It says simply, *And Abram believed the Lord*. Abram was about to give up. He was afraid that, for whatever reason, the covenant with God was lost, that all God had promised would never come to be. But Abram believes and he continues walking with God.

God then reminds Abram of their covenant saying, *I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldees, to give you this land to possess*. Abram asks how he knows this is true and God instructs Abram to gather a young heifer, a young goat, a young ram, a turtledove and a young pigeon. Abram gathers these animals and he slices them in two halves and lays the halves out on the ground. Abram stays with the carcasses, fighting off scavenging birds until dark. At that time, Abram falls into a deep and dark sleep. While he is sleeping, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch pass between the halves of the sacrificed animals and God renews the covenant saying, *to your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates*.

Now, I realize that the last part of this story sounds like some gothic-horror fever dream, but allow me to explain what is going on. God calls for the animals for a sacrifice in order to renew the covenant with Abram. In Hebrew, to make a covenant is literally “to cut” a covenant. In this ritual, animals are cut in half and the one making the covenantal commitment walks down the middle between the divided animals. It is the Lord who moves down the middle and who cuts the covenant. The Lord takes the form of a smoking pot and a flaming torch. Later, in the Moses story, God will lead the Israelites through the wilderness as columns of fire and smoke. The implication of this ritual is that if the one initiating the covenant were to break it, they would be cut in half just like the animals. God pledges God’s life to Abram and Sarai.

For us today, as Christians, as people of faith, we live in the shadow of this great covenant. As we know, even in their advanced age, Abram and Sarai had a son Isaac. And Isaac married Rebekah and they had Esau and Jacob. And Jacob had twelve sons who represent the twelve tribes of Israel, and so on. God kept God’s promise to create a great people. The names Abram and Sarai became blessings. God chose these people to bring blessing to all the nations.

As Christians, to live in the covenant is to believe, as Abram did, in God and God’s promises. Even when we feel that we are suffocating in darkness, because of this covenant God will always be faithful to us. This covenant carries on to Jesus Christ in what we call the New Covenant—a covenant open not just to the descendants of Abram and Sarai, but to all people who confess their faith in Jesus Christ as Son and Lord.

In this season of Lent, as we draw near to the cross, we are reminded of what happened in Jerusalem two-thousand years ago—that Jesus was executed and died. And in Jesus, God died, too. Back in Genesis, in the ritual of passing through the halves of the animals, God was saying, I pledge my life for this covenant and for my commitment to you Abram and Sarai. Eventually, God chooses to come to us as one of us. And he is sacrificed. That death is the fulfillment of the pledge made when God walked between the animal halves. But, you may be thinking, God did not break the covenant. No, God did not. We did. God gave God's life for us. God substituted his life for ours. God took the responsibility for breaking the covenant even though it was not his. God gave himself so that we might live.

As I outlined this series, I was struck by how much joy was present in these scriptures. Normally, we think of Christians as being dour, taciturn souls absent of happiness, that we live lives devoid of pleasures. The season of Lent merely amplifies this impression. But that is not what you will find in these scriptures. There is unimaginable joy in the Christian life. Just consider the love God has for us to give himself for us to honor a covenant. To be a Christian is to live within a covenant of infinite grace and forgiveness. If that is not something to be joyful about, I don't know what is.

Amen.

ⁱ I am indebted to Dr. Rolf Jacobson for his article *Commentary on Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18* accessed at http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4001