

Sermon on Genesis 17:1-7, 15-21; Christ Church, Vienna; 2/25/2024
“The Promise Rests on Grace”

Pray.

This year throughout Lent, one of the themes in the lectionary for the Old Testament readings will be the theme of covenant. If you'll remember, last week we heard about God's covenant with all of creation through Noah, following the flood. And next week, you'll hear about God's covenant with his chosen people Israel through Moses in Exodus, as he gave the law on Mount Sinai. This morning, we look to God's promises to Abraham and Sarah found in our first lesson from Genesis 17.

A covenant could be best described as an agreement between two different parties. Sometimes they are very legal and formal, like leases or job contracts; sometimes they are sacred, like marriage vows said before God; sometimes they are incredibly informal, like arrangements for a game night between friends — “You bring the board games, we'll provide refreshments.”

In Genesis 17, we look in on God's relationship with Abraham and Sarah, not at the beginning, but in the very middle of their story together. If you recall, God promised Abram all the way back in Genesis 12 that he would give him many offspring, making them into a great nation, through whom all the nations of the world would be blessed (Gen. 12:1-3). For most people, this would seem like a wonderful thing, but something that could happen within the laws of nature, since generations naturally multiply in number. Abram and Sarai seem think this — “maybe God means to fulfill his promise in this way, or in that way; maybe we could do this or try that...” Despite the fact that Sarai is described from the beginning as unable to conceive (Gen. 11:30), perhaps they think that they can somehow circumvent her barrenness. So God must appear again in chapter 15 to say that Abram's heir will not be his nephew Lot, nor Eleazer of Damascus — but that “a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir” (Gen. 15:4). And yet, still, this couple struggles, thinking that they must work to attain God's promise through their own cleverness, commitment, creativity, and sacrifice. This fleshly approach reaches a low point in chapter 16, where Sarai offers her own servant Hagar to Abram as a wife, as a way for them to conceive a child that would (at least) be Abram's own flesh and blood, if not Sarai's.

On the surface, Sarai seems to defer out of humility, out of a righteous desire to do whatever it takes to obey God. She would sacrifice anything — even her husband's love — out of an honorable desire to achieve God's promise. Perhaps you can relate?

Sometimes, like them, we would do anything to get what we want. And if what we want is rightness with God, or answers to our prayers, or peace of mind, or assurance about the future, in this life and the next—then we will do whatever it takes. Would you do whatever you thought it would take? Like Sarai? Like Abram?

It feels like a noble place to be. But maybe you think God *needs* you to help him...maybe you think God *wants* you to help.... God will do 90%, and then he wants you to give just 10%—sacrifice a little, obey as best you can, give up something for Lent as a way of giving back to God...

If that is you—and let me tell you, that has so often been me!—then we must look again at Genesis 17. Thirteen years of silence after the mess with Hagar, God finally appears again, and he says to Abram: “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless” (Gen. 17:1). And this time, for the first time, Abram falls on his face before God. Covenant agreement with terms we now realize we cannot live up to...

When confronted with God’s holiness, the command to be blameless, and his new realization that he cannot do anything to bring about the promise, Abram finds that he cannot stand on his own two feet. 10% is not enough. A good try won’t cut it. One painful un-asked-for sacrifice is not what God wanted. God does not want Abraham’s best, because his best is not good enough. Abraham seems to know this now. Abraham can never live up to his side of the agreement, because the covenant with God is asymmetrical. God’s covenant with us is not an agreement between equals who can pull their own weight. It is a totally grace-based relationship in which we bring only our brokenness to the table... But God brings his Son, Jesus, broken on our behalf. God fulfills both sides of the agreement — his righteousness is so great that it is enough for himself **and** for us as well.

The apostle Paul preaches about this asymmetrical covenantal relationship in his letter to the Romans: “For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith” (Romans 4:13). We cannot give our 10% or even our 1% of effort to help God along in achieving our salvation, or really in achieving anything else of spiritual value. Our God is the God who takes things that are dead and makes them alive. God formed Adam and Eve out of the dust of the earth and put the breath of life in them. God miraculously caused Sarah’s infertile womb to bear life when there was no natural way that she could have gotten pregnant. Through choosing Sarah, God shows us with a flourish that he alone has the power to undo the curses of sin and death.

God “gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Rom. 4:17). God specifically chooses the weak, the vulnerable, the barren, the cast out, the broken, the hopeless ones—those ones, in fact, who are finally ready to *receive* instead of trying to *achieve* his love.

During Lent, and really any time you confess your sins, you are acknowledging the barrenness of your own deeds and your own efforts at achievement - spiritual or otherwise. You humble ourselves before God Almighty, like Abraham prostrate on the ground, not to grovel or somehow achieve a feat of humility that will produce what you want from God, but as an acknowledgment of God’s greatness and goodness. And as St. Paul says, the words, “it was counted to him” were not written for [Abraham’s] sake alone, but for yours also. It will be counted to you who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom. 4:23b-25).

I don’t know what promises you feel like God has made to you, or what desires you have in your inmost heart. But whatever you are longing for - whatever you are trying to achieve - is it possible that God will not allow you to attain it on your own terms and in your own way? God has something much better for you than you could ever imagine, something that only he can bring about.

Pray.