

“Promises, Promises: God’s Covenant with Abraham”  
Genesis 12:1-9; 17:1-11, 15-16  
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Last week we began a new series for the New Year, “Promises, Promises.” While many of us are making and breaking New Year’s resolutions, we’re reminding ourselves how faith begins not with *our* promises, but with *God’s* promises to us. The Bible shows us, book after book, chapter after chapter, generation after generation, how God keeps initiating covenants with us. Every covenant begins with *God’s* promise, confirmed by a visible sign, giving us a new identity and way of life.

Last Sunday we started by renewing our baptismal covenant. In the covenant of baptism, God promises to be with us forever, and claim us as God’s own. The water of baptism is the visible sign that seals that covenant. The result is a new identity: we are God’s beloved children. In spite of our fears, in spite of our failures, God helps do what we cannot accomplish on our own. Scripture puts it this way: “the Spirit helps us in our weakness.” The Spirit helps us turn around our toxic habits, helps us resist pernicious temptations, helps us become the people we know God would like us to be. And bit by bit, as we are transformed, our purpose changes too. We no longer live for ourselves; we live for the Lord, becoming messengers of God’s love for the world.

How does this work? It helps to look at the way God’s covenant has transformed others’ lives along the way. So today we turn back to the beginning of Scripture, to the book of Genesis, and God’s covenant with Abraham.

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Now the Lord said to Abram, “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 through you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and [his nephew] Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had

appeared to him. From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord. And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.

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The story of Abram doesn't end there, of course, because the story goes on by stages.

- Soon there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt, where he passed Sarai off as his sister, and gave her to Pharaoh to be his wife. Fortunately, Pharaoh gave Sarai back to Abram again.
- Next, when Sarai was still barren, Abram tried negotiating ...suggested his servant, Eliezer of Damascus, as a good enough heir ... but God refused that idea. Nevertheless, God renewed the covenant with Abram again.
- Next, when Sarai was still barren, they had her servant, Hagar the Egyptian, stand in for her. Hagar bore a son, Ishmael ... but God turned down that negotiation ....idea. Nevertheless, God promised to bless Ishmael with his own great nation, and to this day the Arabs trace their lineage through him. And God renewed the covenant with Abram again.

Our Scripture picks up here, twenty-four long years after God first made the covenant with Abram.

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When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous."

Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God."

God said to Abraham: "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is the sign of my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you:

Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.” God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of people shall come from her.”

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I don't know about you, but it's awfully nice when there are heroes to look up to ... trailblazers in whose footsteps we can walk ... giants of integrity and faith whom we can emulate. In our cynical age, a weekend like this one, as we honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. – it does us good to remember that, now and then, there are still people who rise with conviction and courage to do the right thing.

You would think, that of all the places one might turn for role-models, the Bible would be a reliable resource. You know, the patriarchs and apostles, the saints and martyrs, our forbears in faith to whom we look for courage and strength. You would think so. But then, you might be disappointed.

Abraham is a case in point. The father of three faiths – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – the father of three faiths turns out to be far less than perfect. When God's protection seems unreliable, Abraham risks the covenant promise: he gives his wife Sarai to Pharaoh, so Pharaoh might look favorably on him. When God's promise seems to be taking too long, Abraham takes matters into his own hands: he proposes Eliezer of Damascus as an heir. When God's provision of a son through Sarai seems impossible, Abraham hedges his bets: he takes Sarai's servant girl Hagar to bear him a son, Ishmael. Our father Abraham ... he is far from ideal.

And yet ... and yet as I look to my own failures and weaknesses, I wonder if I'm not better off having Abraham as the father of my faith. Imperfect as he is, he may be just the guide I need, as I try and fail and try again to be faithful to my covenant with God through Jesus Christ.

Let's look more closely at the way it worked with Abraham.

First, God says to Abraham, “go.” Go. Leave your home and kindred and follow me to a new land, and I will make you a great nation. Immediately, Abraham has a decision to make. He cannot stay where he is *and* follow God toward the Promised Land. He cannot say “yes” to God and “yes” to keeping everything the same. He cannot have it both ways.

So it is with us: God says to us, “go.” Go. Leave the expectations of your culture, the voices of approval. And we have a decision to make. We cannot stay exactly where we are *and* follow Jesus toward the kingdom. We cannot say “yes” to God and “yes” to keeping everything the same. We cannot have it both ways.

So what does it look like? A good analogy is the covenant of marriage. When a couple says “I do” in the marriage vows, they are starting on a journey. They are agreeing to leave behind their single life ... they are committing to leave behind dating other people ... they are vowing to become a new family together. They cannot say “yes” to each other and “yes” to keeping everything the way it was. They cannot have it both ways.

It’s the same thing with our covenant with God. When we say “yes” to God, we are saying “no” to other choices. A good example is the young man I talked about last week: the young man Cesar, who was drawn into a toxic life of drugs and gangs and violence. When he was released from prison, he had a choice. He could return to the life that got him there in the first place. Instead, he called his priest, and asked for help. He chose to leave behind the expectations of everyone around him that he would return to the streets. But he could not have it both ways.

That seems like an obvious choice to make, from our perspective. But when you’re in the middle of your culture’s expectations, it’s hard to leave behind the approval built into the system. In our community, the lures for our youth aren’t guns and violence; the rewards are grades and popularity. In our community, the marks of success aren’t tattoos and bikes; the signs are expensive houses and lucrative businesses.

Please don’t misunderstand: I’m not slamming our culture’s aspirations for their own sake. I’m saying that we have a choice to make. The first thing we learn from God’s covenant with Abraham is this: if we accept God’s covenant with us, we better be ready to leave these things behind. We need to be able to say, yes: I will follow. I will leave behind all other authorities, who tell me where I should go and what value I have.

Yes, I will follow; and I will leave behind the “gods” of my culture, whether fame or fortune, beauty or power. Yes, I will follow; and I am willing to journey by stages towards something I cannot even see, trusting that God who called me will not let me go. Yes, I will relinquish control of my own destiny, if it means following the God who has called me his beloved child. That’s the first thing we learn from Abraham’s call.

Which leads to the second thing we learn from God’s covenant with Abraham: it does not happen all at once, but unfolds over time, like Abraham journeying by stages toward the Negeb. Nor is Abraham’s path effortless or clear. It would be nice if God just snapped those divine fingers to fulfill the promise in a painless instant. Instead, the covenant takes Abraham and Sarah from Haran to Shechem, from Shechem to the Negev, from the desert into Egypt, from Egypt to the Negev, from the Negev into Canaan, from Canaan back to the Negev, and so on. And in all that time, for *twenty-four years*, Sarah remains barren, leading them to wonder if the promise of children would ever be fulfilled.

Which makes me wonder how our covenant with God plays out in similar ways. I wonder how often any of us thought we knew where God was leading us, and then it seemed impossible. We thought we were called to manifest Christ’s love by getting married and raising children ... or we thought we were called to use our intellectual gifts for medicine or law ... or our entrepreneurial drive to create businesses and jobs ... or we thought we were called to be servants and peacemakers in our community ... or we thought we were called to be advocates for justice ... we thought we knew where God called us to go, and then we began to have second thoughts, because it seemed impossible. Yet God calls us to keep moving forward in spite of the evidence around us.

This weekend, as we celebrate the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., I’m struck by the tenacity required by those who feel God’s call to do something great. Almost every step of the way, Dr. King had obstacles thrown in his way. After graduating from college at 19, he was ordained, married, and earned his doctorate from Boston University by the time he was 25. He joined the Montgomery bus boycott, spoke in Washington, and avoided his first assassination attempt before he was 30. He studied with Gandhi in India, pastored in Atlanta, and was jailed in Albany, Atlanta, Birmingham and Selma. But he kept going. How? Once he put it this way: “Faith is taking the first step even when you can’t see the whole staircase.” It is not far from the words of the book of Hebrews: “Faith is the conviction of things hoped for, the

assurance of things not seen.” So it is for us. We keep going, because we trust that God’s word is true, and God will never let us go.

Finally, I cannot help but notice that God’s covenant with Abraham wasn’t *for* him ... it wasn’t so Abraham would be wealthy, or powerful, or famous. It wasn’t ultimately so that Abraham would make a name for himself. Instead, Abraham was “blessed to be a blessing.” God made this covenant with Abraham so that God’s blessings could be accomplished *through* him.

And so I also wonder. I wonder what God might have in store for us ... not to fulfill some “prosperity gospel” that makes us wealthy ... not to trust that God will answer our prayers to give us more power, or more clients, or for that matter, more touchdowns ... I wonder what God might have in store for us that we might have the incredible privilege to use our gifts at God’s disposal. To make those around us a little more cherished. To make the world around us a little more just. To do the right thing even if it costs us our popularity, or hurts our corporation’s bottom line. To make our interactions a reflection of God’s mercy, to open our hands to be a vessel of God’s justice ... to examine our commitments as a sign of God’s will. What if ... what if we children of Abraham offered ourselves in the way that he did, to be chosen by God, to be blessed by God, to be used by God not for our own agenda, but for the redemptive agenda of God.

It is not impossible. It is hard, but not impossible. Abraham wasn’t perfect, and neither are we; and aside from Jesus Christ, no one has fulfilled the covenant completely. But there is freedom, sweet, sweet freedom, in deciding to dedicate our lives to the effort. And the promise is this: God is faithful, constantly faithful, even when we fail ... which, like Abraham, we inevitably will.