

God Enters Into Covenant With Abram

(Genesis 17:1-10, 15-17; Acts 3:12-16, 25-26; Luke 1:67-79)

Three major religions claim Abraham as their patriarch. Judaism, Islam, and Christianity all call him Father Abraham. Abraham is praised not only in our Older, but also, as our scripture readings for today show, in our New Testament. We teach our children to sing the "Father Abraham" song with great pride: *Father Abraham had many sons, many sons had Father Abraham. I am one of them, and so are you. So let's all praise the Lord!* But why? Why praise the Lord that we're related to Abraham? What's the big deal about Abraham?

To understand why Abraham is still so relevant to us today, it's helpful to begin with a quick sketch of Abraham's life. When we first meet him in Genesis, his name is not Abraham but Abram, and he's living in Ur, a little to the south of modern Baghdad in Iraq. But then Abram, his wife Sarai, his father Terah, and his nephew Lot move. They travel along the trade routes of the ancient world, settling in the prosperous trade center of Haran, several hundreds of miles to the northwest. And after his father Terah dies, it's there in Haran, in what is now southern Turkey, that Abram receives a call from God (we're not told exactly how), asking him to leave all the security of what has become home and go where God will lead. The destination's not even given!

The Lord says 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 in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:1-3). Thus God makes a promise to Abram, a promise that Abram will have land, descendants, and be a blessing to everyone in God's world. This promise must have been hard to believe, though, because Abraham is now 75 years old. Nonetheless, Abram obeys God and packs his bags.

Abram take his wife and his nephew and the servants they have accumulated and moves south toward the land of Canaan. And once he arrives, he discovers that a lot of people already live in Canaan, and the Canaanites are a warring people. Again, the promise God made him must have been hard to

believe. Why and how would the Canaanites give him their land? Nonetheless, Abram hears God saying, "To your offspring I will give this land" (Genesis 12:7). So Abram builds an altar. He journeys on through Canaan, building altars for God wherever he settles for a while.

Danger shows up quickly. Abram confronts a famine and has to travel to Egypt to get food for his family and livestock. Was that a lack of trust in God? It's certainly not commendable that Abram, in fear for his life, lies and says that Sarai is his sister and, when Pharaoh takes a fancy to her, even allows her to be taken into the house of Pharaoh. But nonetheless, God protects Abram and Sarai, sending plagues until Pharaoh lets Abram and Sarai go--to return to Canaan.

Lot and Abram separate. Lot goes to live in Sodom, and Abram and Sarah go to live around Hebron. Abram receives recognition and blessing from the priest of the Canaanite cult, Melchizedek. Periodically God repeats his promise of land, descendants, and being a blessing to all the people of the world.

Abram's not perfect though. He's human. He can't help but have doubts. All this time, and he still is an alien in a strange land. He and Sarai still have no children. In a vision, he tells God that it looks like his slave Eliezer of Damascus will end up being his heir (Genesis 15:2). But God repeats his promise that Abram and Sarai will have their own child. And then God takes Abram outside and says, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. So shall your descendants be" (Genesis 15:5). As Theologian Walter Brueggemann has explained, "The same God who makes stars beyond number can also make a son for this barren family. And we understand no more about the one than about the other." To prove his commitment, God enters into a covenant with Abram.

Now, biblically speaking, a covenant is an agreement of a sacred character that bonds partners together, undergirded with an oath, vow, or holy promise and often sealed in blood and/or the sharing of food.

So there can be no doubt about his commitment, God instructs Abram to bring him a three-year-old heifer, female goat, and ram, along with a turtledove and a young pigeon. After the animals are cut in half, Abram

falls into a deep sleep, and the next thing he hears is God saying "know this for certain," repeating those old promises. The idea behind this very ancient way of making a covenant seems to be "May this tearing of a body in half happen to me if I let you down." This is the depth of the commitment that the great God of the Universe is making to Abram and his descendants.

More time passes. Abram and Sarai have lived 10 years in Canaan. Sarai and Abram seem to give up on God and his promises. They decide to take matters into their own hands--they decide to have a child through a surrogate. Abram sleeps with his wife's maid Hagar and thus at the age of 86 has a child they name Ishmael, a name which means "God Hears." Indeed! God hears what they have done, and we'd think that God would be furious! But God doesn't desert Abram and Sarai. Even their lack of faith doesn't make God break his covenant with them.

In fact, scripture seems to indicate that 13 years later, when Ishmael is 13 years old and Abram is 99 years old, God renews the covenant with Abram. God says, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless" (Genesis 17:1). God changes Abram's name to Abraham and Sarai's name to Sarah.

Now, in the Bible, a name change means that an inner change has occurred. This seems to indicate that the 24 years since leaving Haran have been a time of learning and growth for Abram and Sarai. Apparently Abram and Sarai have now changed to the point that, in God's estimation, they are ready to be the parents of the child God intended them to have all along.

But at the age of 99, hearing the promise again, the promise that he and Sarah will have a child, Abraham falls on his face laughing. And through his laughter, Abraham exclaims, "Can a child be born to a man who is a 100 years old? Can Sarah, who is 90 years old, bear a child?" But once again, ever patient, God repeats the promise, saying "your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him" (Genesis 17:19).

Shortly after this, God comes to Abraham again in the form of three visitors, making the same promise, the promise of a child. This time, it's Sarah who laughs. But in nine months, she and Abraham have their son, and they name him "He Laughs," Isaac.

And then when Isaac is older--no one knows how old--God tells him to take his precious son and sacrifice him. And Abraham is prepared to do it! This more than anything shows Abraham's commitment to keeping his part of the covenant. He has already gathered the firewood and has his knife in hand...when God stops him, since Abraham has passed the test.

Abraham's story is a long story. We didn't even touch on all of it--like the part where Abraham bargains with God to spare the evil people of Sodom--and God respectfully listens and agrees. Yes, Abraham's story is a long story, but it was given so much space in the Older Testament because it's a story full of meaning for us and our lives.

So what does Abraham's story mean? What's the big deal about Abraham? First, Abraham's a big deal because his story gives us a major glimpse of our God, whom we usually think of as being hidden and mysterious. But how God reveals himself in this story of Abraham! What are some words that describe God in Abraham's story? Patient. Understanding. Forgiving. Merciful. Powerful. Loving. Listening. Respectful. Persistent. Humble. Hopeful. Trusting. Brave. Takes the initiative. Abraham's God, our God is like the father in that favorite illustration about the house that had caught fire. A young boy was forced to flee to the roof. The father stood on the ground below with outstretched arms, calling to his son, "Jump! I'll catch you." He knew the boy had to jump to save his life. All the boy could see, however, was flame, smoke, and blackness. As can be imagined, he was afraid to leave the roof. His father kept yelling: "Jump! I will catch you." But the boy protested, "Daddy, I can't see you." The father replied, "But I can see you and that's all that matters." God calls us to venture into the unknown, trusting him, for it's in the unknown future that we will find the blessing of new life. Definitely the kind of God we can trust with our lives! Definitely the kind of God anyone would want to be in relationship with!

Second, Abraham's a big deal because his story helps us understand God's plan for salvation--salvation for our lives and for our world. Think about what was happening before Abraham. After creation, there's one story after another about humanity's sinful rebellion against the Creator. There's the "Fall" of Adam and Eve, Cain's murdering of his brother Abel, the wickedness that leads to the Flood, and humankind's prideful desire to usurp the position of God by building of the Tower of Babel. The beautiful, peaceful,

harmonious world God created is in confusion and disarray, with one human no longer able to relate to another human. Then, as Theologian Walter Brueggemann expresses it, "The one who calls the worlds into being now makes a second call. This call is specific. Its object is identifiable in history. The call is addressed to aged Abraham and to barren Sarah. The purpose of the call is to fashion an alternative community in creation gone awry, to embody in human history the power of the blessing. It is the hope of God that in this new family, all human history can be brought to the unity and harmony intended by the one who calls. The call to Sarah and Abraham has to do not simply with the forming of Israel but with the re-forming of creation....Abraham and Sarah, in contrast to the resistant, mistrustful world...fully embrace the call of God...the promise is God's resolve to form a new community."¹ Abraham and Sarah's God is a God whose love is no mere sentiment or feeling but is bound by pledge throughout the dangerous and uncertain path of history. His is a "love that will not let us go," a love that covenants, promises, endures, no matter what we humans end up doing in history. God loves us to the point that he himself will even make the sacrifice he couldn't let Abraham make-- fulfilling his promise to be our God and bless us by give up his own Son, Jesus, hundreds of years later.

Third, Abraham's a big deal because his story tells us how we can find blessing in our lives. No reason is given for why God chose Abram. He seems to have been just a random human. This gives us hope. If God took Abram of Ur and turned him into our exemplary Father Abraham, he can do the same with us. We don't have to be perfect. We don't have to have perfect faith. We can question, we can argue with God, we can express anger, we can laugh. What's important is that we be willing to live our lives in relationship with God. We Christians believe that we enter into relationship with God through the new covenant Jesus initiated on our behalf with God, as well as through our baptisms. God then binds himself to us, just as he bound himself to Abraham. For his part, God will be faithful to us. In spite of our shortcomings, our failings, our doubts, God's love is a love that will not let us go. He will fulfill wonderful promises in our lives, even though, we may have to be patient, trusting that God's timing is better than our own. Rabbi Silberman said the most common prayer in the history of the Jewish people is "How long, oh, Lord, how long?" Some of us may be uttering those words ourselves now. But for our part, while patiently waiting for God to fulfill his

¹ Brueggemann, Walter, Genesis, Interpretation Series, pp. 105-106.

promises in our lives, we must be faithful to God by obeying his 10 Commandments and the example he set for us in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. We mustn't let our doubts keep us from going where God would have us go and doing what God would have us do. Even when we're in uncharted, frightening territory, even when what God asks us to do in our present circumstances may seem a little crazy, wherever we find ourselves, we must build an altar to our God, offering him a sacrifice in trust. We mustn't relegate God to just a small portion of our lives. Our relationship with him must be the major relationship in our lives, to the point that we live our lives, as James (2:23) says Abraham did, as a "friend of God." After all, we're bound to each other, in covenantal relationship. And, furthermore, we're bound to one another, all in this new community that God has been creating since he called Abraham.

In the classic novel The Robe, there's a character called Marcellus, who finds himself attracted to the story of Jesus. He wrote letters to his fiancé, Diana, in Rome, telling her about Jesus' teachings, his miracles, his crucifixion, and then his resurrection. Finally, Marcellus told Diana that he has decided to become a disciple of Jesus. In her letter of response, Diana said, "What I feared was that it might *affect* you. It *is* a beautiful story. Let it remain so. We don't have to *do* anything about it, do we?"

God calls us to recognize the story of Jesus and the story of Abraham as more than just stories--but rather as calls to indeed affect us and to change our lives, our choices, our priorities. God calls us out of the comfortable and the convenient into the risky and the untried; out of the security of the past into the uncertainty of the "not yet." He's shaping us, as he did Abraham and Sarah, for an ever closer relationship with him. In spite of what may seem the foolishness of it all, in spite of our fear, in spite of our doubt, God calls us to boldly go forth into the unknown future. For that is where God is, waiting to building a relationship with us, waiting to bless us.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; February 7, 2010