

As we continue our Lenten journey, today we will take a look at another of God's covenants. Just as last week we heard about the everlasting covenant made with Noah – to never again destroy the Earth with water – today we hear about another everlasting covenant. Today we'll take a look at the story of Abraham and Sarah.

We first meet Abraham – then known as Abram – at the end of the 11th chapter of Genesis, but we don't really get into his story until the 12th chapter. At that time Abram lived in the city of Haran in Ur. The first thing we're told, in the first verse of chapter 12, is that “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.’”¹

Now we don't know why God singled Abram out for this mission. But there is an old Jewish tradition which says that:

Terah, [Abram]’s father, is an idol worshiper; indeed, he owns a shop at which local residents purchase idols. One day, Terah leaves [Abram] in charge of the store. [Abram], who has not previously expressed his skepticism about the idols to his father, smashes them all, except for the largest, in whose hands he places a large ax.

When Terah returns, he finds his store in chaos, and questions his son. [Abram] explains that the large idol had become infuriated at the smaller ones, picked up an ax, and destroyed them all.

Enraged, Terah yells at his son, “Stop lying to me! You know that these idols can’t walk or talk or move!”

“If they can’t protect themselves,” [Abram] responds, “then why do you pray to them to protect you?”

How does Terah respond to this eminently sensible question? He takes [Abram] to the local monarch to be burned, but God saves him.

Since there is no basis in the Bible for this story, why did the Rabbis transmit such a tale? I believe that they desired to explain what the Bible does not: why God chooses [Abram] and endows him with a world-transforming mission.²

This world-transforming mission from God to Abram is pure promise. God promises to give Abram the land of Canaan, offspring, and that he and his offspring will be a blessing to all nations. Several times throughout the story of Abram in Genesis these promises are re-made³, and in fact, they are reiterated by God to Abraham's son Isaac⁴ and to his grandson Jacob.⁵ In Jewish tradition Abraham is regarded as the first Jew, as well as the first of the patriarchs.

When God first spoke to Abram he was 75 years old. After many years, we're told in the 15th chapter of Genesis, God formalizes His promises with Abram in a covenant ceremony. But even with the covenant in place, Abram must have begun to doubt that God truly would give him children with his wife, Sarai. And that, in fact, was the case – as we're told in the 16th chapter of Genesis that Sarai offers her Egyptian slave-girl, Hagar, to Abram to bear him a child.

And yet, it was not God's intention that the nation Abram would found would be through a child born to Hagar. When he was 99 years old – 24 years after God first spoke with him – God spoke again to Abram, reminding him of his promises and the covenant made. And this time God was quite clear about how things would go: Sarai, Abram's 90-year-old wife, would be the matriarch of this promised great nation, through a son.

Of all the times God makes his promise to Abram and Sarai, our lectionary chose to focus on this one particular instance from the 17th chapter of Genesis. Why is that? I think that is because, in this particular telling, God further seals the promise with name changes. Abram becomes Abraham; Sarai becomes Sarah. In eastern cultures name changes represent a new relationship or status, a new phase in life. No longer is Abram “exalted ancestor,” as that name means; he becomes “ancestor of a multitude,” Abraham.

We’re told in chapter 21 that Abraham was 100 years old when the promised son, Isaac, was born; Sarah was 91. Indeed, with God all things are possible.

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This notion of a new name representing a new relationship or phase in life continues even today, both in Eastern cultures and in our own Christian culture. Many adults who convert to Christianity and are baptized choose to take on a new name to represent this new relationship, as a child of God, and their new status as a Christian.

This tradition is reflected in how we refer to baptism. Many people still call it a “christening,” which means to baptize or to name at baptism. My dictionary also says that when ships are “christened” it is “by a ceremony suggestive of baptism.”⁶

When we were baptized the pastor called us by name and said, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” The pastor uses only the first and middle names – our “Christian names,” as many people call them – but *not* our family names, for these are the names by which we are known to God.

In our baptism we are named and claimed as children of God. That is our new Christian “family name.” “Child of God.” And it is this sure promise of God, who is as faithful to us as He was to Abraham and Sarah, which carries us through this life.

But as our Gospel text today reminds us, even those of us who confess Jesus as Messiah will still face trials in this life. Baptism – being a child of God – does not save us from times of distress. Indeed, Jesus warns in today’s reading from Mark that those of us who call ourselves Christians must deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow him.

You’ve probably heard someone talking about some difficulty they’ve gone through in life, and say something like, “I suppose it’s just my cross to bear.” But that’s not what Jesus is talking about in this text. When he talks about taking up our crosses, he’s telling us to live like him. And, he’s giving a warning that walking the way of Jesus will not be easy. Living Christ-like lives will often bring us into conflict with those who put their trust in things other than God.

I sometimes wonder how those who heard Jesus' words first-hand responded to this pronouncement. Mark doesn't tell us. As thick-headed and disappointing as the disciples have been in the Gospel of Mark, you might expect at least some of them to leave him, muttering to themselves, "I had no idea Jesus that Jesus was walking in this direction. I'm out of here."⁷

And yet they don't. These ordinary people, called to walk with Jesus, stay with him even though he's promised them a cross. Ordinary people, just like you and me. And the good news in this difficult teaching of Jesus' is this: Jesus believes you are able to bear the cross.⁸

It is this sure promise of God – having been named and claimed in baptism as a child of God – which makes it possible for us to bear whatever life throws our way. For those who believe, whatever happens in this world isn't the final word; this isn't all there is. The final – and only – word we need from God is that *first* word we receive from God. God's "Yes!" to us in baptism. God's "Yes!" to us as loved children. God's "Yes!" to us when we will stand before Him at last, and live forever in God's presence.

Amen.

<1,336 words>

¹ Genesis 12:1-2

² Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, *Biblical Literacy: The Most Important People, Events, and Ideas of the Hebrew Bible* (New York: William

Morrow and Company, Inc., 1997), 22

³ Genesis 12:7; 13:14-17; 15:1-21; 18:18; 22:15-19

⁴ Genesis 26:3-4

⁵ Genesis 28:13-16

⁶ Frederick C. Mish (editor-in-chief), *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1997), 146.

⁷ William Willimon, "Crucifers" in *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Inver Grove Heights, MN: Logos Productions, 2008), 43.

⁸ *Ibid.*