

## FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION

Lent 2 Year B

Gn. 17:1-7, 15-16; Ps. 22:23-31; Rom. 4:13-25; Mk. 8:31-38

Gladstone 28/03/2021

---

This morning, to keep the flow going from last week, I have another question for you: Now, unlike last week, however, there is no need to raise your hands. So, here's the question: When was the last time you made a covenant—either with God or someone else?...

I suppose it would be helpful if we all, first, understood what a covenant is—just in case you're not too sure. We don't really use that word much, these days, apart from in a very legal sense—and when lawyers get involved, it can become very complicated and sometimes quite messy. So, if we understand the term correctly, especially in a biblical sense, maybe then we might have a better understanding of our passage from Genesis this morning, and how our own lives fit into this concept.

So then, what *is* a covenant and what does it mean for us to make a covenant? Well, that fount of all knowledge—not Google this time, although I did use Google to find this reference—the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, of all publications, defines the word “covenant” as:

a binding promise of far-reaching importance in the relations between individuals, groups, and nations. It has social, legal, religious, and other aspects.

*(it goes on...)*

The concept of covenant has been of enormous importance in the tradition rooted in the Hebrew Bible; from it there is derived the long traditional division by Christians of the Bible into the Old and New Testaments (or Old and New Covenants). A covenant (*now this is the really important bit*) is a promise that is sanctioned by an oath. This promise in turn was accompanied by an appeal to a deity or deities to “see” or “watch over” the behaviour of the one who has sworn, and to punish any violation of the covenant by bringing into action the curses stipulated or implied in the swearing of the oath.

So, basically, pretty serious stuff—way more serious than a simple promise.

Most of the promises we make (and sometimes break, as we discussed last week) including the very special promises we might make at a wedding or baptism or some other significant event in our lives—promises that are not only made before people but also before God—are not usually understood in our society today or even always in the church, as covenantal agreements, complete with oaths and implied curses—which come into operation if you stuff up—as we all do from time to time. God, however, sees a covenant

in a very different light. God keeps his covenants, even when we fail to keep ours—and because God cannot swear by anyone greater than himself, the Bible tells us, he swears by himself.

As we saw last week, we serve a covenant-making God.

Last Sunday, on the first Sunday of Lent, we heard the story of how God made a covenant with Noah, his family, and all the creatures of the earth. With the sign of the rainbow, God promised never again to destroy the creation with a flood. That covenant is often understood to have universal application. There are no stipulations. God regretted the flood and announces that such an action will never again occur. Now, several generations later, God chooses to make another, somewhat narrower, covenant—a covenant, which I referred to last week, with the couple from Haran—Abram and Sarai.

The reading that we have this morning from Genesis chapter 17 is, in fact, the third rendition of God's covenant with Abram, and the first to include Sarai as an active player. The first version, found in Genesis, chapter 12, involved a call to leave Haran and head out for a new home. The second version is found in Genesis 15, where God appears to Abram and makes a covenant, promising descendants, who will inhabit the land. Since Sarai is past child-bearing years, she sends her servant Hagar, with whom Abram has a child—Ishmael.

Now, in Genesis 17, God again appears to make a covenant with Abram. Apparently, Ishmael isn't the promised child after all—surprise, surprise. God intended *Sarai* to be the mother of nations—which is interesting because it was usually the husband's descendants that mattered, not the wife's, which explains why—at least to some degree—why Sarai sent Hagar to Abram—her lineage didn't matter. The promise to the aged and childless couple is that they will produce a cache of descendants who will inhabit the land of promise.

There is, however, a major difference between the first and third versions of the covenant. In the first, Abram and Sarai are told that through their descendants (however we count them) the nations will be blessed. In this version, here in chapter 17, nothing is said of that blessing, only that their descendants will inhabit this land—although the promise of the land is omitted in the lectionary selection for this week (along with the word about circumcision). In addition to the promise of Sarai being the mother of descendants, the couple receive updated names to signify the change in their status. No longer are they Abram and Sarai, now they will be known as Abraham and Sarah.

As I noted earlier, there is the middle part that is missing (Genesis 17:8-14). It's the part where God gives the land to Abraham and Sarah, and their descendants. That promise is a bit tricky in our day as Palestinians and Israeli's try to find a path to a peaceful sharing of lands to which both claim ownership.

While the first rendition of the covenant, found in Genesis 12, speaks of the benefit of the covenant to the nations. The focus here is a reminder that God is faithful and will restore the people to the land. Written long after God called Abraham and Sarah, by a people that, in all likelihood, is either living in exile or have recently returned from exile, this is an important promise. God is faithful to the covenant. They will have a home. This is why the word "everlasting" is so important, here. Having lost your home, you hold on to the promise that it will be restored to you.

When we read this from a Christian perspective, however, we need to acknowledge that throughout the Christian era, Christians have understood that the "new covenant" that's entered into through Jesus, replaces this earlier covenant. But that, perhaps, is not entirely accurate. The New Covenant does not replace the Old covenant—it fulfills it.

The *everlasting* covenant with Abraham and Sarah, contain two opening caveats. God demands that Abraham be blameless and walk in the ways of God. That is, Abraham and Sarah are invited to be in relationship with God, as are their descendants. This reference to descendants is also important. There can be no everlasting covenant if there are no descendants. Sarah understands that she is well past child-bearing age, which is why she laughs when she is told God will provide a child (Gen. 18:12-15).

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, which you heard earlier, takes on this story and speaks of the hope that allowed this covenant promise to be enacted. In Romans chapter 4, Paul writes that "hoping against hope, he believed that he would become 'the father of many nations'" (Rom. 4:18).

Paul understood that the covenant is to be grounded in faith in the grace of God. It is not, he believes, based on the law. The point he is trying to make in his letter to the Romans is to reinforce the importance of taking hold of the grace of God brought to the people through Christ, who died for our trespasses, and then was raised for our justification (Romans 4:16-25). This is not, of course, a fully developed atonement theology. Instead, it's an affirmation that our relationship with God is grounded in grace and entered into through faith—faith in Christ and God's promises to us, through Christ. This was also true

for the covenant that God made with Abraham. It was about faith and trust in God, not the Law.

In the gospel, according to Mark, which you also heard earlier, the disciples were also reminded about faith and what it means to follow Christ. Jesus cautions the disciples, telling them that following him will not be easy. The disciples, in turn, find it hard to believe that Jesus will suffer and die—after all, he is the Messiah. Peter challenges Jesus about this, and Jesus teaches that there is no benefit in gaining riches on Earth if it costs us our souls.

So, we must be careful how we read this story of the covenant. The promise is everlasting, but the nature of that promise is not as clear. Faithfulness to the covenant does seem to be a condition, but what qualifies as a failure to stay faithful? One might suggest that those who do not walk before God, will, in reality, remove themselves from the covenant—both in the original context and in the context of the new covenant through Jesus Christ.

As Christians, we have understood ourselves to be included in the covenant made with Abraham. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul speaks of Jesus being that seed, which God promises (Gal. 3:16). Christ, therefore, becomes the pivotal figure in the extension of that blessing upon the nations that God promises to be the destiny of Abram and his progeny.

We need to be constantly reminded not to read Scripture in a way that separates God's people from the covenant that makes with them. Israel stumbles a lot, but God remains faithful. We stumble a lot, and God remains faithful. That is something we need to remember as we continue this Lenten journey that focuses on God's covenant promises. God is faithful, even when we fail to remain faithful.

God's grace reaches across generations, back into the past and forward into the future. God's inclusive love nourishes all creation. This week's lectionary readings invite us to increase our faith, standing on God's promises to his people, both in the Old Testament and the New Testament, and continue to follow in God's ways.

As we continue our journey through Lent, we might ask how we should respond to God's faithfulness in our time.

To him be all the glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.