

The Covenant: A New Beginning

Rev. Glenda Simpkins
Hoffman

Genesis 17:1-8

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

*The covenant
God made with
Abraham is the
new beginning
God made for
all His
people....*

Some years ago, I was at a retreat, and we were asked to choose a Biblical character that we identified with and explain in our small groups why we chose that story. Almost immediately, Abraham and Sarah came to mind because, in so many ways, their story connects with my story. Until I was almost 18, I lived with my family, in the same house, in the same small town, attending the same school from kindergarten through my senior year in high school. My life was not perfect but it was familiar, and for that reason it felt safe and secure. And when it was time to leave for college, I was terrified. I knew I needed to go, but I also knew my life was going to change in ways I couldn't begin to predict, let alone control.

That awareness drove me to God—to find God and to experience God in ways I had not until that time. A decade later, God called me to leave my country to go to Russia to minister. And some years later, I went through the struggle of infertility. Again and again, I have found Abraham and Sarah's story speaking to my story, and that is true even today—not just for me but for all of us. The promise to Abraham is a promise for us. The covenant God made with Abraham is the new beginning God made for all His people; and,

given our current circumstances, we may appreciate that truth more today than we ever have.

To fully understand our passage for today, we really have to review where we have been the last few weeks as Pete has preached about creation and the fall. The pattern of creation is God's people, living out God's purpose, in God's place. In the beginning, God created Adam and Eve for Himself, to have a relationship with Him. They were God's people. They freely lived out God's purpose. That is, they lived under God's rule and blessing, which was manifested in the fact that they were obedient to God's word and lived in a perfect relationship with God. The Garden of Eden was the place where Adam and Eve walked and talked with God. The Garden was the place where God dwelled with His people.

All that came tumbling down when Adam and Eve disobeyed God. With sin came the fall from relationship with God, banishment from the garden, and the curse—an inability to live under God's rule and blessing. Everything, everything in this world has been deeply affected by sin. Genesis 4-11 includes a number of episodes that reflect the deep sinfulness and brokenness of humanity.

And that is where Abraham and Sarah come in. God gives grace and grants humanity a new beginning.

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There is a promise for a new people, new purpose, a new place. Abraham and Sarah are the first fruits of the new creation—the beginning of a great people, a great nation. God will bring back the scattered people of the world and bless them once more. God’s words to Abraham are the first clear statement of God’s promises—the gospel—and these will dominate the rest of the Bible.

Let’s look at the three elements of the promise given by God—people, purpose and place. The first element is introduced in verse 7: The promise is that Abraham’s descendants will become a great nation that will be God’s own people. This is the first promise of restoration after the fall, but it is repeated throughout the Old Testament. It is a constant refrain: “I will be your God and you will be my people.”

Every good story reflects the big story of God’s redemption. I wanted to read the story of *The Run-Away Bunny* to the children and to you, because it is a story that makes very clear who we are and whom we belong to. Did you hear it? The little bunny announces he will run away, and the mother bunny says, “If you run away, I will run after you, for you are my little bunny.” It is a story that beautifully illustrates the covenant love and faithfulness of God, who never lets us go. The whole story, in effect, says no matter where you go or what you do, or what happens to you, I will not stop loving you. I will not stop pursuing you, because you are mine.

The nation of Israel, the Jewish people, has been known as the chosen people. It began with God choosing Abraham to be the Father of a great nation. It was an act of grace. Though Abraham was a good man, and certainly a man of faith, he was not perfect. In fact, if you read much of Genesis, Abraham makes some serious mistakes. But the covenant is not about Abraham or his family; it’s about God and His grace. The covenant involves the eternal; it will never end. It is unconditional—based on God and not what we do. And it provides stability in an ever-changing world. In essence, God promises to be with them, forever, no matter what. The story of the Old Testament is really the story of God loving and pursuing His people through myriad circumstances, and even when they turned away from Him. One of my favorite passages of scripture is Isaiah 43:

But now thus says the LORD,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed
you;
I have called you by name, you
are mine.

²When you pass through the
waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they
shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you
shall not be burned, and the
flame shall not consume you.

³For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your
Savior....

In this covenant with Abraham, God's intent was that the curse of the fall would be replaced by the blessing of salvation.

⁴Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you...

⁵Do not fear, for I am with you.

The response God asked of Abraham is the same one that He asks of us. And it is the same as for the little bunny. We are to live in light of the truth that we are loved. That means we are to trust God. Faith is accepting our acceptance. God longs for us to live in light of what He says is true of us no matter what. When there is nothing to do but wait on God, we learn how deep and wide and broad and high is His love for us. We learn to listen to the voice of God, to hear His whisper, and to believe what He says no matter what: "I love you; you are mine."

These are good words for us today. The financial market has literally rocked our world. And maybe we are more like Abraham and Sarah than we have ever been. While the world as we know it is changing in ways we don't know or understand, the deepest and truest thing about us has not changed and will never change: we belong to God.

The second aspect of the covenant, the purpose, is the promise that Abraham's descendants will be blessed, and through them, "all the peoples of the earth will be blessed." The curse of the fall affected the whole creation—every person, every nation, everything. In this covenant with Abraham, God's intent was that the curse of the fall would be replaced by the blessing of salvation. Right from

the start, God's plan of salvation was for all; it encompassed all nations. This fact is underlined when God changed the patriarch's name from Abram (which means "exalted father") to Abraham ("father of a multitude"). But this multitude is not merely the nation of Israel. The nation of Israel was meant to be a beacon to all the nations. From the beginning, our God was a missionary God. As the people of God lived faithfully under the reign of God, other nations would witness the reality of the one true God and be drawn to Him and be a part of His covenant family.

We have to understand that the thought of being blessed was probably hard for Abraham to believe. In that time and culture, having children was probably the most important sign of being blessed. This passage is actually a renewal of the covenant God gave Abraham 24 years earlier, which is found in Genesis 12. Abraham had been waiting a long time for the promised son.

It is probably worth mentioning at this point that one of Abraham's biggest blunders was not believing God would fulfill His promise. In chapter 16, we see how he and Sarah took matters into their own hands to help God fulfill His promise by arranging for Sarah's handmaid, Hagar, to bear a son of Abraham, named Ishmael. This was not God's plan. This was human scheming and compulsive behavior. A lot of problems arose because of this misstep. God's covenant would be accomplished by God's action and power.

This story is important because it demonstrates our human tendency to

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want to take things into our own hands to make happen what we think is best. We think we need to look out for our best interests. In essence, we don't trust God. But God wants His people to rely on His grace and power to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Sarah and Abraham laughed uproariously when they heard God was going to give them a son at 90 and 100. They were too old to bear a child. But they would by God's grace and power. And more than that, they would become the parents of a multitude. Revelation 6:9 assures that there will be "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language" in heaven. They are to respond in faith and trust and be instruments of God's grace in the world.

Unfortunately, the nation of Israel continually rebelled against God and chose NOT to trust Him. They chose NOT to live under God's rule and blessing. They chose NOT to be a blessing to others but to hang on to their own interests and to be a closed community, and they often bore the consequences of their sin.

Before we are too quick to judge them, we have to confess the ways we look out for our own interests more than the interests of others. We all seek the familiar and comfortable. We are all prone to take care of ourselves rather than trusting God to take care of us. We can trust His love and so risk living a life of love and reaching out to care for the needs of others.

I think of the worship wars my previous church went through. People on both sides of the traditional and contemporary worship services clung to their long-held preferences and views about worship. Rather than asking what is the "right" way of worship, we would do well to ask what is loving—that is, what worship style might reach more people for Christ's glory.

In my 25 years of small-group ministry, I have found one thing to be consistent. Most small-group members resist leaving or opening up a well-loved small group or circle of friends in order to start a new group and make opportunities for more people to grow. There is so much fear about what we might lose. There are many ways we resist being a blessing to others. It's our natural human tendency.

We see this attitude in the world. So many clashes between people and nations are rooted in a desire to have control or power. Even now, we find ourselves in difficult and uncertain circumstances because people made decisions that may have been good for themselves or a few, but the results are devastating and literally reeking havoc around the world.

This is the opposite of what is supposed to happen. Living under God's reign means not only merely looking out for our own interests and gains but believing that we are already blessed. As we trust God to take care of us, we are freed from our fears, and greed and compulsions. We are free to love and bless others. Jesus is our model for this way of living. He is the second

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person of the Trinity, the only begotten Son. But he let go of his rightful place at the Father's side to become human. He let go of his human family to follow his calling into ministry. He let go of his very life that others—namely you and I—might live. Jesus lived the truth that he was blessed and so was willing to be a blessing to others. The way of blessing is the way of Jesus—the way of love. As we trust in God and His love for us, He will enable us to love others as He has loved us.

The third element of the blessing to Abraham and Sarah was related to the land. In verse 8 we read, “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.” You recall from Genesis that God created the earth and everything in it as a place where He would dwell with His creation—a place where He would walk and talk and be with the people He created. Earth was meant to be the temple of God—a delightful, enjoyable, peaceful place where we (God's creation) would be at home with God (our creator). The fall disrupted this plan. Since Adam and Eve were banished from the garden, there was not a place for God's people to dwell.

That's why this promise to Abraham is so significant. The promise was for the future, and would not be fully realized in Abraham's lifetime. Someday, somewhere, the people of God,

Abraham's descendants would have a place. That place would be the land of Canaan. It's a delightful place, not because the location or geography were so great, but because God's presence would be there with His people.

As I was thinking about this passage the past few weeks, I thought of the musical *West Side Story*, which is really a redemption story. It's about two gangs battling over turf. It's a story that reflects the painful reality of fallen human beings who are willing to destroy each other to hang on to what is perceived to be right for them. But at one point, the two main characters, Tony and Maria, who have fallen in love even though they come from different gangs, sing this beautiful song:

There's a place for us,
Somewhere a place for us.
Peace and quiet and open air
Wait for us
Somewhere.
Somewhere....
We'll find a new way of living,
We'll find a way of forgiving....
Somehow,
Some day,
Somewhere!

These lyrics reflect the desire of every human heart since Adam and Eve fell from their place in the garden. We yearn for a place to live as we were meant to live, in a right relationship with God and with each other and all creation. And because we are people who live in real bodies in time and space, we long for a place where there is peace and

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harmony, love and joy. God promised Abraham and his descendants a place, a land that would be theirs where they could live under the reign of God.

The Promised Land of Canaan was to be that place for the nation of Israel, but it was only a foretaste of heaven. In Revelation 21, we read the fulfillment of the covenant: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth.... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with people, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’ He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’”

The new beginning promised in Abraham has been established through Jesus Christ. By his death and resurrection, we are his people. He has given us a purpose—to love the Lord with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength and to love others as he has loved us and to make disciples—not just of people like us but all nations. And he has assured us of a place with him in heaven for all eternity.

And now we have come full circle. Abraham is a Biblical character I have lived with and reflected on for many years. But I was overwhelmed with gratitude to be in this passage again this week to see how his story intersects with my story and all of our stories. God knew we would be in the

midst of this financial crisis. God knew we, like Abraham, would need to be reminded of His promise—the certainty and eternal nature of His covenant in the midst of these uncertain, unstable times. A pastor friend reminded me recently that we have never lived or ministered in a situation like we are facing in our country. This is unfamiliar territory. She’s right.

Whether we like it or not doesn’t matter; we are now leaving a familiar place for another less familiar place. We’re not where we used to be, and there’s no going back. The economy we have built our future security on has crumbled, and our bubble has been burst, and we don’t know what’s coming. We have been dislocated, but with that comes the opportunity for relocation. With this crisis comes the opportunity to “find a new way of living” as the song says.

So what does the covenant say to us today in the midst of our current situation?

God is with us. Whatever happens, whatever comes, God is with us. The most important and truest thing about us has not changed. We belong to God. And though our lifestyles may be affected dramatically, even in this new kind of wilderness, God wants to bless us and make us a blessing. The blessing He has for us may be different than we have yet experienced, but He does want to bless us.

No one knows what the future holds, and while the uncertainty can make us anxious, I think this is an opportunity to focus on what is sure. God is with us, and He is preparing

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us for an eternity with Him in heaven, and He wants to use us to bless others, and He wants us to learn to walk by faith. Are we going to trust our IRA or GOD. The appropriate response to God's covenant is the same as it has always been. It's not clutching for control or finding wealth, success, or achievement—it is faithfulness. Will we trust God and His word in these uncertain times? Will we rely on His grace and power to do for us what we can't do for ourselves? Friends, we have the opportunity to live by faith and not by sight—to live in light of eternity.

It's so interesting to me that last year we planned to study through God's story. We couldn't have predicted what is happening now with this financial crisis. But next week, we begin looking at the liberation of the Israelites from slavery and their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. Friends, this is providential. Their journey speaks to our reality right here, right now, because we are leaving one kind of experience that we have known and traveling to another that is unknown and will undoubtedly feel very foreign, unfamiliar, and uncomfortable. My hope and prayer is that we not only learn the story of God but find ourselves in that story and learn to lean on the promises of God and to rely on the power and grace of God—just as the Israelites did. I urge you to sign up today for a small group. Share the journey with others. The story of the Exodus may have never been as applicable to us as Americans as it

is right now. Don't miss this opportunity to have God speak to you and to share in community. Remember, God is with us, He is still faithful. He is still working. He will bless us and make us a blessing as we learn to trust Him more. Just as the character and promises of God were trustworthy and true for Abraham, so they are for us today. AMEN.

