

Promises to Keep

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Genesis 17:1-8

Sermon Series:
A Journey of Faith –
A Study on the Life
of Abraham

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I've heard it said that 50 is the new 40 and 40 is the new 20. There is something to this trend, given that researchers at the National Institute on Aging verify that 90 is the new 80. The number of 90-year-olds in America has tripled over the last three decades, reaching 1.9 million. By 2050, this number of non-agenarians is expected to quadruple. Incidentally, the state with the greatest percentage of 90-year-olds is North Dakota.

Morris Wilkerson still delivers the mail at age 91, as he has done for the past 70 years in Birmingham, Alabama. Gladys Burrill still runs marathons at age 92. Charles Futrell finished a triathlon on his 90th birthday. Patricia Gartland is a 90-year-old table tennis pro from Australia.

George Bernard Shaw wrote the play *Farfetched Fables* at age 93. Leopold Stokowski signed a six-year recording contract at 94. At the tender age of 96, Harry Bernstein wrote his life memoir, called *The Invisible Wall*. Grandma Moses was still painting at age 99.

People can do lots of things in their 90s. Making babies is not high on the list. Our Scrip-

ture lesson tells the story of a 99-year-old man and his 89-year-old wife who are about to become parents for the first time. According to the Guinness Book of World Records, the oldest living father is a 94-year-old Indian man. We know of no one else outside of scripture who has fathered a child at the century mark.

“Abram was 99 years old when the Lord appeared to him and said, ‘I am God Almighty, walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will make you exceedingly numerous’” (Genesis 17:2). Isn't it grammatically awkward to place “me” before “you” in a sentence? Shouldn't it read, “I will confirm my covenant between you and me?” But the covenant is not initiated or sustained by Abram. That's why God refers to this covenant as “my covenant.” Nine times in this chapter, God reinforces that this covenant is “my covenant.” The “me” is properly placed in the sentence. God's covenant is between “me and you.”

I talked about this word “covenant” in a sermon two Sundays ago. God establishes a

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covenant with Abraham, not a contract. A contract is strictly a business arrangement. I have a contract with a furnace company. This contract specifies that I pay them \$250 annually. In return, they service our furnace and come whenever it malfunctions. If I don't pay the bill, they don't service the furnace. It's just as simple as that. No payment; no service.

A covenant is far more binding; comparable to the ties that bind us together as family. When Chris and I became parents, we entered into a covenant relationship with our two children. I became Andrew's father and he became my son. Two years later, I became Emily's father and she became my daughter. In those early years, this covenant was kept by us, not by them. When our kids hit the terrible twos, they would walk around the house and mutter "No" under their breaths. "No" came naturally to their vocabulary. In those early years, we kept the covenant, not they. My kids learned obedience. It didn't come all at once.

God confirms this covenant in Genesis 17, a covenant that he first established with Abraham in Genesis 15. God's role in the covenant is set forth in the words that follow the phrase "As for me." Our responsibilities are enumerated after the words "As for you." "As for me" expresses God's role in the covenant. "As for you" identifies Abram's part in this covenant-making oath.

We begin with God's role in the covenant: "As for me, this is my covenant with you." What follows is a whole series of first-person-singular promises: "I have made you the father of many nations...I will make you exceedingly fruitful...I will make nations of you...I will establish my covenant with you...I will give you land" (17:5-8). I, the Lord, will do these things.

Incidentally, this is the place in the story where Abram's name is changed to Abraham. "No longer will your name be Abram (meaning exalted father); now your name will be Abraham (meaning father of a multitude)" (17:4-5). Incidentally, Sarai's name is also changed in this chapter to Sarah, meaning princess or mother of nations (17:15).

Abraham's duties in the covenant are spelled out in verse 9: "As for you, you will keep the covenant." The tense of the verb "keep" expresses continual action. Our job is to keep on keeping the covenant. This is where our obedience factors into the story. Obedience is not something we bring to the table all at once. We learn obedience a little at a time.

The story of Abraham's life is not told with quick dispatch. I find the pace of this story to be rather slow, almost ponderous at times. It's been 24 years since God first appeared to Abraham in Genesis 12 and promised him an heir (12:1-3).

Every time Abraham calls his son, he will be reminded that he laughed in disbelief at the prospect of a son.

It's been 13 years since Ishmael was born in chapter 16. Here in chapter 17, 24 years and five chapters after they are promised a child, Abraham and Sarah remain childless. Our narrator seems in no hurry to recount this meandering tale of infertility. Maybe, just maybe, God is waiting until Abraham and Sarah are as good as dead, biologically speaking, before God makes conception possible to demonstrate that the power belongs to God and not to us.

God issues to father Abraham, in verses 10-14, the sign of the covenant. Initially, I was going to skip this section, but it is crucial to the story, "Every male among you shall be circumcised" (17:10). That means Abraham is to be circumcised at age 99, Ishmael at 13 and every male child in Israel. Really? The thought of Abraham being circumcised at age 99 makes me cringe. God will not merely make a covenant, God will cut a covenant. This covenant will be personal to Abraham; really personal.

It's always a little delicate to preach about circumcision. When I came to this church as a 28-year-old novice preacher, I was given the assignment to teach Confirmation Class for middle school students. The curriculum made a point of associating the New Testament covenantal sign of baptism with the Old Testament covenantal sign of circumcision. A 7th grade girl raised her hand and

asked the question I feared most, "What's circumcision?" I swallowed hard and told her the truth: it is the cutting away of skin from the male reproductive organ. I'll never forget her expression. Her face turned a whiter shade of pale as the class laughed nervously. Ever want to get away?

It's striking how nonchalant the Bible is about dealing with sensitive subjects. Our narrator expresses no embarrassment or awkwardness in these verses. The Biblical writers do not flinch in regularly calling us to circumcise our hearts. Given that God's promise is expressed in conception, perhaps such a cut on Abraham's body is the most appropriate sign.

Abraham's reaction to this promise of an heir in verse 17 is rather jarring. He falls on his face and laughs. "Will a son be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of 90?" The whole idea of a child is so preposterous that Abraham involuntarily laughs out loud.

If you were in Abraham's sandals, you might laugh, also. Yet, God persists in the promise that this couple will have a son a year from now (17:20). The name for this child, are you ready for this, will be Isaac, which literally translates, "he laughs." Every time Abraham calls his son, he will be reminded that he laughed in disbelief at the prospect of a son. Who says there is no

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humor in the Bible? God has the last laugh in Abraham's life.

The essence of this covenant is expressed in verse 8: "I will be your God." So, if God promises to be our God, then we, by inference, are God's people. Let me reduce this covenant to a single sentence: "I will be your God and you will be my people." You'll find these words spoken over and over in the Old Testament.

We can be lots of things in this world, but one thing we can't be is God. Only God can be God. I'm sorry to break the news to you, but you can't play God. Evidently, some of us haven't gotten this memo yet that we can't play God. The notion that we can play God can be rather intoxicating. History is replete with examples of people who wagered Faustian bargains and who manipulated Frankenstein-like experiments to get their way.

It never works well when I try to play God. I'm a lousy god. My vantage point is flawed by sin and limited by finitude. It works inestimably better for God to be God. God doesn't make promises with fingers crossed behind His back. God is not a capricious sovereign. God promises to do right by us. God has our best interests at heart. God is not dangling us like a puppet on a string.

Our job is to trust ourselves to this promise-keeping God. I can trust you, Lord, even when my life doesn't make sense.

The story of Abraham is about someone who learns to trust God. He has some major setbacks along the way. He attempts to pawn Sarah off as his sister. Abraham's reproductive misadventure with Hagar, in the previous chapter, is not his shining moment. Yet, these stories remind us that father Abraham has feet of clay. He learns obedience by trial and error. By the end of his life, Abraham grows strong in faith. He exerts so much faith by the end of his life that Abraham seems virtually unrecognizable to the way we first encounter him. "Abraham grew strong in his faith," Paul writes. He became "fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised" (Romans 4:20-21). God is able, abundantly able, to do what He has promised.

Faith trusts God's ability to keep a promise. That's the essence of faith. I trust God's ability to keep His promises.