

Old Testament Covenants of Grace, Part II: New Identities
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
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Scripture:
Genesis 17:1-7,15-16
Romans 4:13-19

We lost Oswald Saturday afternoon.

He had put up a brave fight, but these last days proved too much for him. On Monday he looked out over his natural habitat. Despite a goofy grin and a misshapen nose, he stood proudly, 4 feet, 6 inches tall, which we know because our nine-year old daughter, Sophie, could look him straight in the eye.

Then, in Benjamin Button-like fashion, as spring temperatures muscled winter aside, he shrank, day by day, hour by hour. His stout shape withered until his head rolled off and his arms fell to the ground. In the end, after five days that saw the great snow of 2009 wiped away by four glorious days of warm spring sun, all that was left of Oswald was a puddle.

Henri Nouwen, a popular spiritual writer of our time, said that Lent is like that – a season when “winter and spring struggle with each other for dominance.”

“I think this is an appropriate image,” Nouwen went on to write, “because during this time of year the darkness and light within each of us become locked in conflict.”¹

This week, the second week in Lent, we return again to the Old Testament for our primary text from the weekly lectionary. As I said last week, it may seem like a long way from Genesis to the open tomb that is our destination in these seven weeks. However, if we think about Lent as our moving toward God, we can be encouraged every step of the way by the knowledge that God made the first move toward us.

That is what we found in last week’s text – the story of how God pledged in the rainbow after the great flood that God would never destroy the earth in such a way again. It was God’s first covenant, a covenant of grace, in which God realized humanity would never let go of sin. So God promised to bind up part of God’s self, sparing humanity forever from the full effect of God’s anger, even when we fully deserve it.

¹ Eternal Seasons, p. 81

Today we find another clear sign of our creator's true nature – the story of how God binds God's self to a specific people in an everlasting covenant of grace that would ultimately produce a savior.

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As the apostle Paul wrote in our New Testament text, Abraham and Sarah give birth to a “new creation” and stand as the parents of “all of us.” God renames Abram Abraham and, as one pastor taught me years ago, Abraham can be loosely translated as ‘Big Daddy.’

For Jews, Abraham is the great patriarch, the father of their people. For Muslims, Abraham is the model Muslim. For Christians, Abraham is widely seen as one who models an ideal faith, though we will come back to that in a moment.

As the story goes, God appeared to Abraham when he was 99 and at the end of a long and prosperous life. God promises the old man that he will become the father of “a multitude of nations” through a son God will grant to Abraham and his equally old wife Sarah. Their nation will ultimately produce kings and God promises to be their God, forever.

The operative word here is “covenant” and in Abram and Sarai's day covenant's were not made or taken lightly. As the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann notes: “The covenant is the primary metaphor for understanding Israel's life with God. It is the covenant which offers to Israel the gift of hope, the reality of identity, the possibility of belonging, the certitude of vocation.”²

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When we looked at the story of the great flood last week, I noted that scholars attribute the authorship of its verses to a group of priestly writers in the 6th century. They assembled several parts of what we know today as the book of Genesis – and it's important to note that they did so when their entire nation had been sent into exile, evicted from their homeland and all that was familiar.

The story of the covenant with Abraham we find today is the third time the story appears in scripture and scholars attribute this version to these same priestly writers. That's important, because those writers brought to their task a sense of profound loss and disorientation, feelings, perhaps, more and more Americans are feeling these days.

² Interpretation commentary on Genesis, p. 154

Unlike the other versions of this story in Genesis, this telling omits any reference to God promising Abraham land. That makes sense, doesn't it? If the priestly writers of these verses were writing when they had been removed from their land, it's natural that they would want to see in this story a much larger promise, one that goes beyond place.

Sense of place is a powerful part of our identity, in any age.

Two weeks ago, our oldest daughter, Ellison, learned that she had become a farmer, sort of.

My uncle's wife had died and my uncle's will had been read. It revealed that Ellison and five of her second cousins had been named owners of the family farm in northeast Mississippi, at least the 60 acres or so that are left.

The land, you see, had been in the family for four generations, since my great grandfather assembled it in mid- to late-1800s. But through the generations, the land had been divided among family members from many different branches. Much of it has been sold.

The oldest of the new generation of owners of the family place is in her 30s and the rest are 18 and younger. No one lives in the old house and no one in the family seems to be on track to become a farmer. It remains to be seen how we will make it all work.

But, having spent many summer weeks as a kid on the land, I have to admit my heart swelled when I heard that my uncle had gone to such generous lengths to keep the place in the family, despite the uncertainty of how it all might work out. That's the way it is with land and how it becomes part of who we are.

My point in all of this is that land, a sense of belonging to a specific place and a place belonging to us, has long been important to the human desire for stability and security.

All the more impressive, then, that the Hebrews in exile looked back on this story of Abraham and in their telling of it conveyed their belief that God's covenant transcended time and place and circumstances.

Surely, that is a good word to the millions of families who are being evicted from their homes through foreclosure in these awful economic times. Surely it is a reassuring word to the thousands in Charlotte who are homeless, that the hope of God's promise is with them, under the bridge, in the alley or in the cardboard shack in the woods.

Just as surely, it is a rallying cry for those of us who are called to do something about the growing shortage of affordable housing here in Charlotte. But that is another sermon for another day.

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When we read the story of Abraham's faith – and understand how the Hebrews found comfort in it in their time of exile - we might think to ourselves:

“That’s all very nice, but it’s just not me. I don’t have the kind of faith the Hebrews had in exile, the faith to believe in the hope of God when all I see around me is suffering. I don’t have the faith of Abraham in these long and dreary days of economic winter, despite what the weather is like outside.

“No matter what I do in these forty days of Lent or over the course of my lifetime,” we may be thinking, “I am not capable of that kind of long obedience. I’m not cut out for that kind of devotion. “

Here it is worth noting that the reputation for unflinching faith that history and tradition has generally granted Abraham may not be quite so deserved. Yes, God calls Abraham to walk in a radical faith, but let’s remember: Abraham’s first reaction was to laugh at God’s proposition. Then he doubted God could pull it off. Then he decided he would buy make a side bet by having a son by a concubine rather than waiting on the son that God promised to him and Sarah.

It’s OK for us all to admit it – that we are more like the real Abraham. We doubt. We scheme. We struggle to answer God’s call on our lives, especially in this season of Lent when we try to be intentional about reading the Bible or praying or practicing Christian love and patience toward all. Lent can be a time when we are keenly aware of our failures of faith, especially in this third week when Holy Week is still a month away.

We long to be the devoted and loyal son who stays home but, in some way or another, we may act more like the prodigal who runs off with his share of the inheritance. We long to be like Mary, who sat quietly at the feet of Christ to learn and grow. But too often we stir around and preoccupy ourselves with work and complain there is always, always too much to do.

Or we might say to ourselves that we weren’t ready for Lent. Henri Nouwen, the spiritual writer I mentioned before, wrote these words early one Lent.

“I am certainly not ready for Lent yet.... I could have used a few more weeks to get ready for this season of repentance, prayer, and preparation for the death and resurrection of Jesus.”³

But the truth is we will never be faithful enough and we will never be ready. If left to our own timing, we could never prepare adequately for the journey the cross. Because that is true, friends, the story of Abraham and Sarah is great good news.

It reminds us that we worship a God who makes the first move, a God who gives us new identities and new beginnings, a God who stands by, full of grace, when we react with snickers or doubt or attempts to take matters into our own hands, as Abraham did.

God has already made the first move on each of us, in claiming us in our baptism, when God said the words, “I have called you by name. You are mine.”

How, then, should we respond? I close with one more passage from Henri Nouwen.

“Lent is a time of returning to God. It is a time to confess how we keep looking for joy, peace and satisfaction in the many people and things surrounding us, without really finding what we desire. Only God can give us what we want. So we must be reconciled with God, as Paul says, and let that reconciliation be the basis of our relationship with others. Lent is a time of refocusing, of re-entering the place of truth, of reclaiming our true identity.”⁴

Let us pray:

Ever gracious God, draw us ever closer to you in these forty days. Forgive our laughter and doubt at your expense, be patient with our presumption that you are not all sufficient. Abide by us, walk with us, claim us again. Under the providence of your eternal covenant, guide our passage from the dark winter of our souls to the bright spring of our faith. And give us courage to die to all that is evil that we might be resurrected to serve you. We ask all of this in the name of the one whose death and resurrection made possible our own, Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.

³ Eternal Seasons, p. 82

⁴ Eternal Seasons, p. 82-83