

“Promises, Promises”

Genesis 17:1-8, 15-16 – March 8, 2009

INTRO: We hear in this reading, about our ancestors in the faith, old Abraham and Sarah. We are kind of dropped in the middle of their story, in today’s reading, because there’s a story that precedes it and more that follows it. God had originally called this couple to leave their homeland and they did. God promised them children, but no children were born. Perhaps they got desperate and decided to figure things out on their own, so Abraham has a son, whose mother was not Sarah, but Sarah’s slave, Hagar. We’re now at the point of another promise from God. God makes it clear that there is an expectation that they not only take God’s promises seriously, but that they live faithfully. At this point in the story, maybe it’s Abraham and Sarah’s chance to start over with God.

I remember when I saw where my great great grandparents lived in Vermont, in a little town called Panton. I was thrilled to find records that they were there and it was fun to think of my people being from that place. It’s no well-known metropolis, it had about 500 people back in the 1800’s and is about the same size today. But, it’s a gorgeous spot there on Lake Champlain, with the Adirondack Mountains in New York to the west, and the Green Mountains to the east. And I’ve wondered why they ever left there. Five generations later, I look at the photo of Lake Champlain that’s displayed in my house, and I have this crazy thought: that could have been my view. That could have been what I would see every day, if my ancestors had just stayed there, rather than heading west to the black swamp of Ohio and then on into Indiana. Now, I know that’s a bit crazy, because my great-grandfather might never have met the woman from Pennsylvania that became my great- grandmother. So, had he not left, the deal is, I wouldn’t even be me.

But on one of the old plat maps, there’s a property right south of Panton, owned by a Mrs. Burwell. And it’s RIGHT on the lake. I’ve always wanted lake property! That could have been mine, to enjoy forever.

There’s a restaurant in Madison that keeps things in the family. It’s called El Pastor and the owners came here from Mexico. In Mexico City, they sold tacos from a street corner stand. And the father is now the head cook in the restaurant here, the mother waits tables and supervises, and the recipes are all family recipes. The father and mother came to the states and opened the restaurant for their daughter, as her inheritance. She’s now married, and believes this is going to be the place for her kids—that they will be the future owners—it will stay in the family. (*Isthmus*, 3/9/06) It’s the family inheritance.

It’s often the family inheritance that provides cabins up north, that have been in families for a number of generations. They enjoy gathering at these places that become so familiar. They love the woods, the lake, the stone fireplace so much, that they’ll put up with the lumpy beds and the bugs and the mice. They have built memories together so that it’s part of their family heritage. But you know as well as I do, that sometimes things change. The next generation of kids may not want to spend their hours cooking Mexican food at the restaurant. Or eventually the elders may no longer be able to take care of the place up north and the younger generation finds their life going in a new direction, and the cabin is sold. The promise to always keep this in the family is no longer the most important thing, and the line of inheritance of that particular place suddenly ends.

The story of Abraham and Sarah is a story about inheritance and promises and covenants that go with it. It’s a story where God takes the initiative to make a covenant with them. God moves toward them and speaks first. The biblical understanding of a covenant is that it is rooted in a relationship, many times between a superior and an inferior. The more powerful partner offered the covenant to the weaker. It could be between people or between God and people. A covenant is a sworn agreement, where parties solemnly promise something concerning their future relationship, but it’s not a legal agreement.

In the Bible, we find that covenants were made between God and people at major turning points: the covenant with Noah after the flood, the covenant God made with Moses,

the covenant God made with Israel at Mt. Sinai (Ten Commandments). And a part of God's covenant with Abraham and Sarah, includes some promises: (1) That they would have many descendants, more numerous than the specks of sand in the desert, and more numerous than the stars in the sky. (2) God makes the promise to always be God to them, AND to all their many descendants. (3) And, that those descendants will eventually have a land to call their own—not a lake property, but the promise of a homeland.

And even though the emphasis is on God's initiative here, a response is expected from Abraham and Sarah. There are divine promises as well as human obligations. "If you obey me and always do right, I will keep my solemn promise to you." (vs. 1b-2)

Another way of saying this is, "walking before God" or living always in God's presence, which basically means to live openly with God, in a manner pleasing to God. It's not living a perfect, sinless life, but living faithfully in every aspect of the relationship and being loyal to God. Staying in this kind of relationship with God, becomes the way Abraham is to respond to the covenant. Abraham already had faith, at least some faith. He was no great somebody at this point in the story, just a wandering, aging shepherd. Yet because he trusted in God and walked with God in faith, the Jews and Christians and Muslims all call him father.

"Walking in the presence of God is a kind of synonym for faith." (Bill Wylie-Kellermann)
And "faith is believing in God's ability to keep a promise." (John Jewell)

There's a story told about a Bible translator in India who was working to translate the New Testament into one of the many dialects in India. He was looking for a word for "faith", and was struggling to find the right one. One day, a young boy of the village came into his study. Hunched over his manuscript, the missionary waved the boy over to a chair in the corner, saying he'd be with him shortly. He looked up, to find the boy walking around the chair, looking at it from every angle, but not sitting on it. The missionary repeated, "Have a seat," but the boy continued to look at the chair in amazement. Then the translator realized that this boy had never seen a western-style chair, and he wasn't sure he wanted to sit down on such a flimsy thing. The boy then asked in his native language, "Can I give myself to this and know it will hold me up?" And the translator then knew he had found his word for faith. (*Emphasis, March-April 2006*)

Abraham demonstrated his willingness to keep his side of the covenant, when he put his life into the hands of a God who would hold him up.

We need to remember, that the covenant between God and Abraham, wasn't just between them, but it was an everlasting covenant—meant to last for all generations. "Keeping the covenant then, and now, means doing justice to, being faithful to, the relationship with the God who made this covenant. The way one's life is shaped is crucial." (Terence Fretheim)

I sometimes think that we have become so far removed from our ancestors in the faith, that we've forgotten this covenant was to be for us too.

One of my favorite stories that comes from the Eastern Sufi tradition is about a relative who once went to visit Nasruddin, bringing a duck as a gift. The bird was cooked and eaten. Soon, one guest after another began to call, each claiming to be a friend of the friend of "the man who brought the duck." Each one, of course, expected to eat off that bird. Finally a stranger arrived and said, "I am a friend of the friend of the friend who brought you the duck." Nasruddin placed before him a bowl of steaming water and said, "This is the soup of the soup of the duck that was brought to me by your friend." (*The Song of the Bird*-Anthony de Mello)

Sometimes, I believe our response to God and to Jesus Christ, gets very watered down. We've become disciples of the disciples of someone who had an experience with God, rather than having our own relationship or experience with God. When it's that far removed, that watered down, walking with God, can end up meaning very little.

The covenant we have with God was there long before we were born. "The covenant is God's promise to be our God, which contains within it the promise that we shall be God's people—not by our consent but by our creation." (Barbara Brown Taylor)

“We don’t have the luxury of simply reminiscing about what God did long ago. We are called, through Abraham and Sarah, to live in this relationship with God, in the here and now.” (Claus Westermann)

They are our ancestors, and it’s our turn to decide who we are, whether we want to own up to our relatives, and whether we too are going to try to walk in the presence of God ourselves.

In Kathleen Norris’ book, *Dakota*, she tells of moving into the house her grandparents built in Lemmon, South Dakota in 1923. She and her husband moved there after her grandparents died, because nobody else in the family wanted to hold an estate auction, and they offered to move there to manage the farm interests that her grandparents left. Kathleen says that her grandmother’s “spirit visited her in her kitchen and taught her how to bake bread using her bowl, her old wooden spoon and bread board. And for a time, Kathleen tried on her grandmother’s Presbyterian church, the way she wore her old jackets and used her furniture. Religion was in her blood and in her ghosts, because Grandmother Totten had a livable faith and a tolerance that allowed her to be open to the world. Kathleen put on her grandmother’s religion until it became her own.”

We may not always be those who end up in our family home, or end up living on a lake property that has been in the family hundreds of years, but when it comes to our faith, I believe our faith needs to be our own--the deed needs to be in our name. Just because our grandmother had faith, doesn’t mean we do. We have to claim it. Just because our family has long been a Wauwatosa family, doesn’t mean we are automatically walking with God. And just because we are a part of a church, doesn’t mean we are walking with God.

We can’t rely on an earlier generation to have had the relationship with God. We can’t ride on their shirttails. We need that first-hand experience ourselves, which can affect the way we live today, and perhaps provide for the generations that follow us, something worth inheriting.

--Sue Burwell