

Time After Time

Scripture: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

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We continue in the Season of Lent, and we celebrate today some of our faithful ancestors. We remember that Jesus went into the desert. It doesn't say Jesus lived in the desert or camped in the desert; he went into the desert. Who knows how much he had on his back or with him? What I do know is that he carried the scroll of the Torah, and the Tanakh bible on his heart. He knew the traditional stories and scriptures and used them to conquer temptation. We too can gain spiritual strength by reading through the Hebrew texts. Rev. Hannah mentioned the scripture texts that Jesus shared with the tempter in the desert. You can go back on our website, Facebook or YouTube to watch her message if you did not get a chance to yet.

I know that Jesus had the stories of Abram and Sarah in his mind while he was in the wilderness. Jesus knew of the covenants that God had made with God's people. The first one in Genesis 8 and 9:

I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

This word covenant in Genesis 9:11 is the same Hebrew word: "bereti" that is used in our scripture today. It means covenant, or promise, between God and people, or people and people. This rainbow promise can be seen as a one-sided promise by God - there are no conditions for Noah and his family or their descendants. Some people may interpret that the part in between the description of God's promise in Genesis 8 and 9, where it says that God blesses Noah and his family to "be fruitful and fill the Earth, with guidelines not to eat the meat of animals or to kill anyone" is the human side of the promise. God makes a promise to all humankind.

In Genesis 15:18 God makes a promise to Abraham. This word is "berit" in Hebrew, a derivation of "beriti" - this one is thought of as an alliance, a friendship or promises made between...mutuals. If you want to see this idea of covenant in visual form, I invite you to watch the video from thebibleproject that Tara will put in the comments. For children, youth, and adults it outlines covenants between God and people through scriptures and talks ultimately about God's promise through

Jesus. It is by far the best visual I have seen to show the history of God's covenants.

In our text some chapters later in Genesis 17, God reminds Abraham of his promise to make of Abraham a great nation. In today's scripture there is no mention of the land. Instead, God focuses on through whom the promise will come. It will come through Isaac. The same Hebrew word, "bereti," is used. A promise is being made, this time between God and Abraham, and Abraham's descendants. This time there is a side to be held up for Abraham and a sign of it. Abraham and his people will need to be circumcised. It will be a sign of the covenant.

Another sign of the covenant is God giving Abram and Sarai new names. After this point they will be called Abraham and Sarah.

Twice Abram fell on his face in this chapter. Once when God appears to him and another after God finishes the promise with the signs of the covenant. Have you ever had a fall on your face moment with God? A moment where you have heard God so clearly or you have seen the fulfilling of God's promise, or even an answered prayer, or a time of deep need? As reverent as it may seem to fall on one's face before God, the second time Abraham falls in his face, he laughs...and it leads to God naming his son (through Sarah) Isaac which means in Hebrew...he laughs. I am glad for the levity. I am glad for the laughter. (I have to admit every time I read this scripture for today, I read "and then he fell on his face," and I laugh as if it is a prat fall.) Interactions with God are serious and joy-filled, as we experience God's promises through scripture and our lives.

In December I had the honor of officiating a marriage ceremony. While I prepared, I was reminded of the signs of the covenant we make to our partners and the promises we make to one another and God during the ritual. Just in case you don't remember:

Traditionally partners will make vows to one another. In our Book of Worship, we have these: In the name of God I take you to be my spouse to have and to hold from this day forward for better, for worse, for richer and poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death.

Or...I take you to be my partner, and I promise before God and all who are present here to be your loving and faithful spouse as long as we both shall live. I will serve you with tenderness and respect and encourage you to develop God's gifts in you.

We exchange rings as signs of our promises to one another. And often there is a change of name that happens afterwards to also show that two have become one.

Our promise making to one another through marriage feels a lot like the promises God makes to us. They are to be taken seriously, but joyfully.

In our book study on the Mind of Christ this week, we pondered what it meant to be faithful. Faithful is to keep our promises. But there is also action to being faithful. It is not just a personality trait, or characteristic. It is something you have to prove.

Many of you do not know, but I was invited by a retired clergy in our conference to attend the Ryle Institute of Public Policy with a group of interfaith leaders in the Phoenix and Tucson areas. Six to eight hours a week I read and attend a virtual gathering with speakers from the Arizona state Legislature and non-profit groups to talk about how we improve and support our communities. It has been like drinking out of a firehose. I have always stayed away from our government because I always thought it was too complicated for me to understand, that it was not useful to me as a citizen because I did not have any agency and because of the negative stigma of the influence of church to the state and vice versa. I have found instead that: knowledge is power.

And the one most important thought that has come out of my time in the program (although I have many) is the thought of shared obligation. Living together, in this state, we have an obligation to our neighbor, to our schools, to our police and firefighters. We have an obligation to take care of one another. What I have known through theology and biblical interpretation is lived out in our world. Our wellness is tied to one another. When one suffers, we all suffer. For instance: Even though our children may be grown and raised, or we never had children, we would want the children growing up in our neighborhoods to have safe schools and plenty of opportunities to be educated to grow to be adults who contribute positively to the community we live in.

This shared obligation, to me, is like an unspoken covenant relationship we live in with our neighbors. God has instructed us to love one another as we love ourselves, to look out for one another as we would look out for ourselves. We take care of each other and we are cared for in return.

God's covenant with Abraham and Sarah is to be taken seriously and joyfully. God and Abraham are expected to be faithful to their side of the promise.

How will you be faithful to God? How will you help pass on this trait of faithfulness to your families and to your neighbors and friends?

One step is to lead by example. Be faithful to what you say you will do. When you fail, acknowledge it, and ask for forgiveness. Take promises seriously. Do not agree to something if you do not mean it.

How will you be faithful to your neighbor? How will you care? How will you share what you have?

A guiding song for me this week has been Cyndi Lauper's "Time After Time." I think of it when I remember that God's promises to God's people are eternal. And our promises in marriage remind us to be eternally faithful. And maybe God asks us to be eternally faithful to one another too.

*If you're lost, you can look, and you will find me*

*Time after time*

*If you fall, I will catch you, I'll be waiting*

*Time after time*

*If you're lost, you can look, and you will find me*

*Time after time*

*If you fall, I will catch you, I'll be waiting*

*Time after time*

Take with you the eternal promises of God and remember the covenants we have with one another. Remember that you too have been given signs of God's covenant. When we promise to God at our baptism to have Jesus as our Lord, we go from being children of God to disciples of Jesus Christ. Amen.