

Three things are promised in this covenant: land, a nation, and a blessing. The land God promises is a rich land, a fertile land, a land flowing with milk and honey. It's an immense land bordered by the Tigris-Euphrates Rivers on one side and the Nile River on the other (Gen. 15:18-21). This Promised Land will become the kingdom of Israel.

The nation that God promises isn't just any group of people: this will be a great nation, God's own special people, committed to following God and serving God's purpose. This promise is expanded in Genesis 17, when God promises that nations and kings will descend from Abraham (17:6). Abraham's descendants did become the nation of Israel, and from his line sprang Kings David and Solomon, and eventually the King of kings, Jesus of Nazareth.

Lastly, God promises a blessing. Not only will Abraham be blessed, but he will also be a blessing. Through Abraham and the nation that comes from him, God will extend God's blessing to all the families of the earth. Land. Nation. Blessing. Notice how each of these provisions renews God's covenant with creation. The covenant includes a land to rule and subdue. The covenant requires being fruitful and multiplying to produce a great nation. The covenant entails the blessing of life through the presence of God! Here, again, we see the cultural, social, and spiritual purpose of God, planned from the beginning of creation, renewed in the covenant with Abraham.

Abraham proves himself faithful to God: he obeys God's command, gathers his immediate family, and hits the road. But there's still a very big problem: Abraham is 75 and his wife Sarah is nearly as old – both are past the normal age of child-bearing and child-rearing; what's more, Sarah is barren, unable to conceive. How is God to achieve the promises of land, nation, and blessing if the principle characters in the covenant are unable to have children?

This is same the question Abraham and Sarah asked of God. When told of the promise of a son, both Abraham and Sarah laugh at God! They think the promise is absurd. In fact, later in the story, Abraham fathers a child with a slave girl in an attempt to force God's hand and deliver on the promise. Remember: Abraham is not perfect, but he is faithful! Now, lest you think him disloyal, when God reaffirms the covenant to Abraham, scripture says that *[Abraham] believed in the Lord, and God accounted it to him as righteousness* (Gen. 15:6). Abraham and Sarah were just beginning to discover the amazing power and enduring faithfulness of God.

God waits 25 years to give them a son: Abraham is 100 years old and Sarah is 99 when Isaac (whose name means 'laughter') is born. God waited, but God delivered, because God, who promises, is faithful. God can make a way when there is no way. God can deliver when the promise seems hopeless. God always fulfills what God intends to do.

The promises of land, nation and blessing came to pass: Abraham had a son, Isaac, who had a son, Jacob. It is Jacob whose name is changed to 'Israel' and his twelve sons became the patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel. As God's chosen people, the Israelites were to bear a physical sign on their bodies: circumcision. This is the sign that God required of Abraham and his descendants, to show that they were people of the promise (Gen. 17:11). By this sign, the Israelites remembered the covenant with Abraham and their inclusion in the promises of land, nation and blessing.

The Psalmist, David, reflecting on this covenant, wrote: *[God] is mindful of his covenant forever, of the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations, the covenant that he made with Abraham, his sworn promise to Isaac, which he confirmed to Jacob as a statute, to Israel as an everlasting covenant, saying, 'To you I will give the land of Canaan as your portion for an inheritance'* (Ps. 105:8-11).

God promised to bless Abraham and the families of the earth through him, and this promise finds its ultimate fulfillment in the New Covenant of Jesus Christ. The prophet Jeremiah spoke of this when he said: *The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt — a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the LORD', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more* (31:31-34).

This anticipates the forgiveness of sins made possible in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The unconditional and eternal nature of the covenant with Abraham is seen in its reaffirmation to Isaac (Gen. 21:12; 26:3-4), and to Jacob (Gen. 28:14-15) and with its fulfillment in Jesus. God had already fulfilled the covenant with Abraham by giving him land, and a nation, and a blessing; but an important element of the Covenant with Abraham

requires a still-future fulfillment when the Messiah comes to rule. *“This promise is according to [God’s] grace in order to be guaranteed to all Abraham’s descendants, not only to [the Jews] but also to [Gentiles] who share the faith of Abraham, who is the father of all, as it is written, ‘I have made you the father of many nations’”* (Rom. 4:16-17).

We are the heirs of that covenant promise. Some as actual descendants of Abraham and others who are gathered into the family by adoption. God makes no distinction. Together we receive these promised blessings if we seek the Lord and obey God’s commandments. At our baptism, with the sign of water, we covenant to serve the Lord and keep God’s commandments. When we partake of the sacrament, we renew that covenant and declare our willingness to take upon ourselves the name of Jesus. As Paul wrote to the Galatians: *If you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise* (3:29). We are God’s adopted sons and daughters and Christ’s brothers and sisters, and by this we become heirs to the blessings of an eternal family, as once promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

In Genesis 12, God promised, through the nation of Israel, to bless the nations of the world. The ultimate blessing is the forgiveness of sins and the beginning of the Messiah’s glorious kingdom reign on earth. Quoting Paul again: *All the promises of God find their yes in [Christ]* (2 Cor. 1:20). Everything promised to Noah, Abraham, Moses and David, and their descendants is confirmed and secured by the coming of Jesus. If the sin of humankind and the righteousness of God were an obstacle to the fulfillment of those covenant promises, then the death and resurrection of Jesus removed those obstacles forever. Jesus’ coming confirms all the covenants. Jesus is God’s “yes” to the covenant promises; and if you are an heir of those promises, then Jesus is God’s “yes” to you.

Prayer: Covenanting God, we thank you in the name of Jesus that Your Spirit witnesses to us, assuring us that we are your children. God, make known to us Your ways, unveil your Word to us, and bless us with your Holy Spirit. Amen.

# The Covenant with Abraham

Sunday, September 25, 2016

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Genesis 12:1-3

Last week we began a series of sermons of the great covenants of the Bible. A covenant is a promise or an agreement made between God and God’s people. We noted that covenants have eight common characteristics: 1) covenants are initiated by God; 2) covenants are made to faithful people – not perfect people; 3) covenants are long-term promises, made to future generations; 4) covenants are universal, they apply to all who hear and obey God’s Word; 5) covenants are unconditional, they rely not on our behavior but on God’s power to be fulfilled; 6) covenants are always fulfilled because God is faithful; 7) covenants are accompanied by a sign; 8) covenants foreshadow the New Covenant we have in Jesus Christ.

After God destroyed the world with the flood, God made a covenant with Noah. Noah and his family were to repopulate the earth. God made this covenant as part of God’s plan for the renewal of creation. God hoped that this second creation would fare better than the first; but God would again be disappointed as the world descended into sin and squabbling.

So, God changed tactics: rather than deal with the whole world, God would work through one person, Abraham. There was nothing special about Abraham, no specific reason why God should choose him. In fact, there were some really good reasons for God not to choose Abraham. I’ll mention just two. First, Abraham lived in Ur, among the Chaldeans, a pagan people who worshipped idols: so Abraham did not know God. The second, is Abraham’s age: he was 75 years old when God called him to leave his home and people and strike out across the desert. Now, I know many extraordinary and capable 75-year-olds, but in Abraham’s day the life expectancy was about 40; so, Abraham was old by any standard.

And yet, Abraham is the person God chose. The covenant that God initiates with Abraham appears early in the story; in fact, the covenant is made as part of God’s call to Abraham: *Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed’* (Gen. 12:1-3).