

establishes a link between each of us and this couple, teaches us who we are as people of faith, and proves that we are in a covenant relationship with God.

God and the covenant. Abraham and Sarah were covenant people. A covenant is a promise-based relationship, something that we see today in the covenant of marriage, in which two people promise to be loving and faithful to each other, for as long as they both shall live. We also see these relationships at work in homeowners' covenants, in which the buyers of homes make promises to abide by certain guidelines, such as restrictions on the colors they can paint their houses. We see these relationships between corporations, between churches, and between nations. Each side promises to uphold their side of the deal.

God's covenant with Abraham begins when the Lord says, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous" (vv. 1-2). God promises to be in relationship with Abraham and make him the father of many. In response, Abraham is asked to walk before God and be blameless. He is tasked with living and doing things God's way, which often means living and doing things differently from how the world lives and does things. This is a journey – walking with God – toward a better way, a more holistic way, and more holy way of living.

God's way is not always easy and there were times when Abraham failed in his walk with God, but God proved faithful to Abraham, and promised, "I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you" (v. 7). Mercifully, God is faithful to the covenant, staying close to Abraham and making him "the ancestor of a multitude of nations" (v. 4). This covenant is an "everlasting covenant," which is good news for Abraham, and for all of us as well. Being people of the covenant is a key part of our "ancestry puzzle." It tells us who we are...now and always.

Prevenient grace. As covenant people, we are in a relationship with a God who always acts first. Notice that God takes the initiative in the covenant with Abraham, saying, "I will make my covenant between me and you" (v. 2). God acts before Abraham does anything. It's the same in God's relationship with us: God is always at work even before we know that God is acting, paving the path for us in ways that will heal us and help us. Theologians call this "prevenient grace," meaning the grace of God that comes before any human decision.

In his book, *The Silver Chair* (part of the Narnia series), C.S. Lewis tells the story of a lion named Aslan, who can be thought of as a symbol for Jesus. In the book, Aslan hears two children calling to him for help, and after rescuing them he says, "You would not have called to me unless I had been calling to you." That's prevenient grace, the grace that comes before.

God always acts first. We call to God because God is calling to us. Because God offers us forgiveness, we ask for forgiveness. Because Jesus is a healer, we pray for healing. Because the Spirit is active since the first day of creation, we ask for the Spirit to fill us today. "We love because [God] first loved us" (1 John 4:19). God's love comes first: prevenient grace.

The Bible is a story of covenant. As people in covenant with God, we see the entire Bible as the story of promise-based relationships. God first makes a covenant with Noah (6:18), and then with Abram (15:18). When God hears the groaning of the people of Israel in Egypt, God remembers the covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Exodus 2:24). God speaks with Moses on Mount Sinai, and gives him two tablets of the covenant, the Ten Commandments (Exodus 31:18). After the Israelites enter the Promised Land, the angel of the Lord says, "I will never break my covenant with you" (Judges 2:1).

Unfortunately, the people of Israel break their side of the deal. "They have broken my covenant," says God through the prophet Hosea, "and transgressed my law" (Hosea 8:1). So, God promises through Jeremiah to "make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah" (Jeremiah 31:31). This new covenant comes to life in Jesus, who offers his own body and blood on the cross to show us exactly how much God loves us. At the Last Supper, Jesus gives his disciples the cup and says, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28). The letter to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus is "the guarantee of a better covenant" (Hebrews 7:22). Here again, we learn that God is always faithful, even when we are not. God never breaks this faithful and loving relationship, even though we often fall into faithlessness.

The good news of the Bible is that we are covenant people, with an ancestry that goes back to the everlasting covenant that God made with Abraham. When we use the "23-and-Abram" DNA service, we discover that our promise-based relationship with God is stronger than any human failings. We can build our lives on the foundation of the old and new covenants, and trust that "neither death, nor life...nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

Covenant DNA reveals a family connection. Our covenant with God proves that we really are a part of God's family. Each of us has the same covenantal DNA. It was God's plan from the beginning of the world that we should be part of God's family. And even when we do stupid, irresponsible, unfaithful things, God still loves us and God is faithful to the covenant.

The apostle Paul writes that God “chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before [God] in love. [God] destined us for adoption as [God’s] children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of [God’s] will, to the praise of [God’s] glorious grace that [God] freely bestowed on us in the Beloved” (Eph. 1:4-6). God chooses us and makes us members of God’s family through the death and resurrection of Jesus. He died to redeem us and to bring us back into right relationship with God, binding us together by the power of the Holy Spirit as children of God.

Today we celebrate the addition of a new brother and six sisters to the family of faith. This congregation nurtured Piper, Sterling, Tessa, Madalyn, Ashlyn, Emily, and Natalie and taught them the covenant promises and responsibilities inherent in faithful discipleship. Today they profess for themselves their faith in Christ Jesus as Lord and Savior, call upon the Holy Spirit for guidance and strength, and claim their inheritance as children of God. Today, they take up the challenge God gave to Abraham, to walk with God and to be blameless. As we welcome them into the family, we are reminded that the everlasting covenant begun with Abraham continues with them and with every one of us because God loves us, and God is faithful to God’s promises.

Prayer: Promise-Making God, we thank you for our common ancestry with Abraham through Jesus by the power of Your Spirit. We rejoice that in You we are one people, united in common faith and purpose. Bless, today and always, our newest family members: Piper, Sterling, Tessa, Madalyn, Ashlyn, Emily, and Natalie. Give them strength and courage to walk with you. Guide them in ways that bring you honor and glory, and which will fulfill your purpose for them and your Kingdom. We ask this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Sources:

- Jones, Sally. "Best DNA ancestry test 2017: 23andMe vs Ancestry vs FTDNA vs Geno 2.0." *Exploring Life's Mysteries*, March 6, 2017, exploringlifesmysteries.com.
- Thomas, Adam. "Unless I had been calling to you." *Where the Wind*, April 28, 2009, wherethewind.com.
- Zarembo, Alan. "DNA can reveal ancestors' lies and secrets." *Los Angeles Times*, January 18, 2009, latimes.com.

23andAbraham

Confirmation Sunday, February 28, 2018
Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16
Ephesians 1:3-14

For Christmas, I received a DNA ancestry test kit. DNA ancestry tests are hot commodities right now. More and more people want to know who they are, where their ancestors came from and whether they have any fascinating or mysterious relatives. "Thanks to scientific breakthroughs over the last few years, you can now fill in more of your ancestry puzzle than ever before" (*Exploring Life's Mysteries*, March 6, 2017). Just order a DNA test kit online, spit into the cup, mail it in, and find out about your family heritage.

We may uncover exciting facts about our family background or we may discover that our ancestors are not the people we thought they were. Our family tree may contain war heroes, inventors, presidents, or pioneers of industry. Then again, our family tree may contain some outlaws, liars and two-timers. We never know! That’s the fun of discovery!

So, I’m excited about the DNA test. Most of you know that I am an adopted child, which means I have absolutely no information about my family of origin. I am a man without a country. A pastor without a past. A fellow without a fellowship. A dude with no clue to his history. I sent my DNA test off this week, and I am eager to get the results (in 6-8 weeks). But even though I don’t know a thing about my human family of origin, I do know that I am part of the family of God.

The book of Genesis contains reliable and important information about our ancestors in the faith, Abraham and Sarah. This husband and wife are not morally perfect people, by any stretch. Sarah laughs when the Lord predicts that she will have a son in her old age, and then she denies to God that she laughed (18:9-15). Abraham lies to King Abimelech of Gerar, describing Sarah as his sister. Fortunately, God intervenes and tells the king the truth before he crosses the line with this married woman (20:1-7).

Yet, despite their imperfections, God uses this husband and wife to become ancestors of "a multitude of nations" (v. 4). The three great monotheistic faiths - Judaism, Christianity and Islam - are all considered Abrahamic faiths, with a shared family tree. Our moral, ethical and spiritual lives would be greatly impoverished if we did not have Abraham and Sarah in our ancestry. For us, the Bible is a kind of "23-and-Abraham" DNA service. It