

COVENANT OF LIFE

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16
Mark 8:34-38

February 28, 2021
2nd Sunday in Lent
Marilyn Allen

During these Sundays of Lent, we are learning about the covenants of the Old and New Testament. A covenant is a binding agreement between two or more individuals or groups. Last week we considered the covenant God made with Noah, and with all of creation, that God chooses to be for us.

The first version of the covenant the Lord makes with Abraham is full of the word “blessing.” From Genesis, chapter 12: “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.” The covenant is full of promised blessings, but there is precious little detail. As the promise is repeated, in chapters 15, 17 and 18, what the Lord intends to do becomes clearer. It has to do with family and land. Abraham will not be a dead-end. He is given hope for a future. He is given the promise of life – not just for himself, but to bless the world.

There is more to a covenant than just the promises of God. As the other partner in the covenant, we also make promises, and actively work with God to fulfill those promises. In the New Testament reading, Jesus spells that out quite graphically – “deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me.” And “those who lose their lives will find them.” As we enter into the covenant, letting go of our own priorities, we receive the blessing of life.

ABRAHAM

Abraham, friend of the Lord, they call me. Sometimes I've wondered. This God I've tried to follow has some strange ways of getting things done. Here I was, seventy-five years old, and the Lord said to me, "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 in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." So we set out, toward the land of Canaan, but I think I went more on the basis of my friendship with God than on the basis of that promise. After all, how would I become a great nation? My wife Sarah had never been able to have children. Do you know what that means? Without children, my name would not survive. Without children, I would be forgotten. Without children, I would be cut off from all future.

Along the way, the Lord spoke to me again, showed me all the stars of heaven, and in a mysterious vision, sealed the covenant between us. I believed God would make me the father of nations, but I didn't know how.

Then Sarah had an idea. "My Egyptian slave-girl can be a surrogate mother." So I cooperated in the plan – Hagar was young and beautiful – and sure enough, she became pregnant. I would be a father now for sure! But I guess I'll never understand women. I was excited about the baby, but Sarah and Hagar simply couldn't get along after that.

To make a long story short, the Lord spoke to me again. "I will bless your wife Sarah, and I will give you a son by her." I said, "Let Hagar's son be blessed." But the Lord insisted. "I will bless Ishmael, but Sarah will have a son." I couldn't help it – I laughed at the idea. She was so old! I fell on my face, laughing. Sarah laughed, too,

behind the tent flap. Yet somehow, I knew the Lord was right. Isaac was born – a son named "Laughter," a child of the covenant. Now my name would not be cut off. I would have a future, through my son. The blessing of life and family would be for us after all.

SARAH

You heard my husband's story. But it's not my story. After all, no one ever called Sarah a "friend of God." It wasn't my idea to leave Haran, and at our age! But then, we women don't question what the men decide. We just have to go along. So I did.

Abraham was always a good husband, and I always tried to do everything I could to make our tent the kind of place where he could be proud to bring the other herders, the traders, and the occasional traveler. But nothing could make up for the fact that I didn't have children. Why did Abraham's God punish me like this? So, Abraham would be the father of many nations? Tell me how!

Finally, I got tired of waiting. If the Lord couldn't be bothered to help me, I would just have to help myself. "Take my slave-girl Hagar," I said to Abraham. "Maybe I will have children by her." Well, of course, Hagar got pregnant right away. She started acting like she was Abraham's wife, and he treated her that way too. I could see I had made a big mistake.

And then the Lord had the audacity to speak to Abraham again. This time I heard them from inside the tent. When I heard the Lord say that I, Sarah, would have a child, I burst out laughing. I may not be educated, but I know when it's too late. And yet, the Lord remembered me, and blessed me as promised. Finally, I knew that God cared for

me, as well as for my husband. When Isaac was born, I said, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.” Our tent was blessed with life.

MARY MAGDALENE

"Deny yourself," Jesus said. I heard him. I was never named as one of the disciples, one of the inner group – after all, I'm a woman – Mary from Magdala. But I was there. I heard Jesus teach, saw him heal, watched him create a new family out of all of us.

But this business about denying self – well, I'm afraid it could be misunderstood. I was doing that – denying myself – long before I met Jesus, and I don't want to go back to what I was. You know, we women have always been treated like children – we should be neither seen nor heard. I tried hard to be a good daughter, a good wife, but I never felt like I was doing it quite right. Something inside was always saying, "Speak up! You're smarter than they are. Why should women have to keep quiet?" At first I tried to tell them what seemed obvious to me. But they called me a disobedient child, said I had no shame. Everyone looked at me so strangely that I learned to hush that voice inside. I gave up trying to be who I was. I just tried to live by the rules.

It was a long time before I realized that I was sick. I began to stay away from everyone. I was afraid. I felt like I was dying inside. Then occasionally something would burst out, and I would scream with anger. They said I was possessed by demons – seven of them. I don't know how many, but I was miserable.

That was when I met Jesus. He had a crowd around him, and it wasn't all men. There were other women there – Joanna, Susanna, and a couple of other women named

Mary. They seemed so free. When I looked at Jesus, I knew that he was the reason. He came to me and spoke the word, and my demons began to leave. "Jesus, you're the one who set me free, who gave me life! Don't ask me to go back to denying myself again."

But, you know, Jesus called me, and he calls me "friend." Maybe Jesus isn't telling me to deny the "me" God created me to be. Maybe he is telling me to deny the "me" everyone else thinks I ought to be. To follow Jesus I need to leave behind what I was before, and to go with him and all his followers into a new way of living together. Some people might call that "denial." I call it new life!

PETER

That was some scene yesterday. I – Peter – in an argument with Jesus! Can you believe it? He really is something special – a prophet, I know, and more than a prophet. I still think he is the promised Messiah, but when I said that yesterday, he told us not to talk about it. So of course, I was right – he **is** the Messiah!

That's why the next thing he said was so strange, that he would have to suffer, and be rejected by the leaders, and be killed. As the leader of the disciples, I felt it was my place to correct him. We've never been taught anything about the Messiah dying, and our scribes have been studying this for years. But I didn't want to correct him in front of everyone, so I took him aside. I spoke firmly, I admit it. I was so sure he was wrong. But he looked around at the others and practically yelled at me, loud enough for them to hear, "Get behind me, Satan! You're thinking like a man, not like God."

And then he called the whole crowd over. I guess I really stirred him up. "If any of you want to follow me, you will have to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow

me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it."

Come on, Jesus. I don't want to deny myself, at least not more than I already do. My wife isn't too happy about my being on the road all the time like this, you know. I gave up my job, gave up **fishing**, of all things, to follow you. I hope you weren't talking literally about a cross. But even if you meant it figuratively, I don't want to feel condemned and rejected for following you. We're doing something important here, and I want it to work out right.

But I wonder, maybe I **do** need to give up something. Maybe I need to give my own ideas about who you are and what you're trying to do. Maybe I don't know you as well as I think I do. And yet, because you've called me, because you say we're friends, I'm willing to follow. Please, Jesus, lead me into life.

*** Following God. Following Jesus Christ. That is what our baptism calls us to do. In the sacrament of baptism, especially of young children, we hear the words, "child of the covenant." Each one of us is a child of the covenant, called in our own baptism to be a follower of Christ. What does it mean now, in this time and place, to follow Christ? For us that may mean, like Abraham, leaving behind the old life to enter a new future. Or like Sarah, we may have to wait for God's plan to unfold. Like Mary Magdalene, we may need to refuse our culture's definition of who it says we should be. Or like Peter, we may be called to open our minds to a new understanding of Jesus Christ, and his way in our world. For all of us, the call is a call to true life, in which we receive the grace of God, and extend that grace to others.

Child of the covenant, "I will bless you and make you a blessing."

Let us pray. God of the covenant, we are amazed that call us to receive your promises. Bless us with new life and with strength to follow your call, that we may become the people and the church you created us to be. In the name of Christ our Savior, Amen.