

GREAT IS THY FAITHFULNESS

GENESIS 17:1-7; 15-16

FEB. 25, 2024

Rev. John R. Annable, University Baptist Church

This morning, I would like for us to look at the wonderful story of how God's unchanging love toward his creation begins.

Please note that this Sunday's scripture comes from the very first book of the Bible, Genesis. I also want to underscore that it comes from the Old Testament. There are still those who say things like, "The Old Testament is a book of law and judgment; the New Testament is a book of love and grace." Nothing could be further from the truth.

There is not a more gracious, good news, gospel sort of story than the one that we hear today, the story of God making a covenant, a promise, to Abraham and Sarah.

Our hope is in the kind of God we've got (or should I say, the kind of God who has got us?). It's God's promise given to Abraham and Sarah, given to all of us: I will be your God, and you will be my people.

The covenant is made with Abram and Sarai, and they thus become Abraham and Sarah, signifying the covenant as a fresh beginning. But the impact of the covenant is far reaching to the "*ends of the earth*." Not only the generation of Abraham, but future generations. Thus, it's not too much to claim that the gracious promises of God to Abraham extend all the way to us in this congregation.

Before we are done with Lent, we will have ample opportunity to take a sober, critical look at our life and to admit to some of the myriad of ways we (to put it like St. Paul would) "*fall short of the glory of God*."

Yet we do so, not from the standpoint that we wretched, terrible sinners are attempting, for the first time in our deceitful little lives, to be honest. Rather we confess our faults as those who know the truth about who God really is and what God is really up to in the world. God is the one who says, time and again, "*I will be your God; you will be my people*."

The promise God made to Abraham and Sarah, is a promise made to you. Remember that gracious, undeserved, unearned promise and don't ever forget it.

Do you see how this promise, or as we speak of it in Bible terms, "*covenant*," made to Abraham, is our greatest comfort when it comes to our life with God? God is not the one who threatens us and hammers us for our failures. God is the one who promises to be our God no matter who we are or how far we wander. Thus, the story of the shepherd who seeks out the one lost of the hundred sheep in the fold.

This is so important because I suspect that some of us have been told that church is where you come to find out what you need to do to lead a better life or to set some things right that you have, through your sin and error, messed up.

No. Church is where you come to be discover who God really is and what God is up to in the world. God isn't the one who raises the bar so high and says, "*Here. Let's see if you can try hard to chin up to that. Are you worthy of my love or not?*"

No. Church is where you come to hear about the promise that God made to Abraham and Sarah. The great-great-great grandparents of everyone here this morning, in more ways than one. Abraham and Sarah, though they were not particularly "*good people*," are blessed by God with a promise. That promise? "*I'll be your God and you'll be mine, no matter what*."

You and I, though we are not particularly "*good people*," are here this morning, in church, beneficiaries of the covenant God made with Abraham and Sarah, not because we are good but because, as Jesus, child of the covenant, put it, God is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish (Luke 6:35).

We, who did not know how to come to God, were blessed by God coming to us. We who could not keep our promises to God were given steadfast promises by God.

That night, God said to Abraham, in effect, "*In spite of who you are and are not, or what you have done*

or not done, I WILL be your God and you WILL be my people. Even if you have had a tough time doing good things for me, I'll do a good thing for you. I promise to give you a life you could never give yourself. Though you may stray from me and my way, I'll never let go of you."

Eventually, Abraham's family blessed the world by faithfully bearing Jesus Christ, son of David, great, great grandson of Abraham and Sarah, into the world. Don't ever again let anybody tell you that the Old Testament is not good news.

Ever asked yourself, "*Who is God?*" or "*Where is God?*" More tellingly, have you ever asked yourself, "*How does it stand between me and God?*" Well, here's your answer in this Sunday's good news from the Old Testament. From Genesis, at the very first of human history, in the covenant made to Abraham and Sarah, we have a window into the heart of God, a sure indication of who God is and what God is up to in the world. God is not the one who sits back, disappointed that, time after time, we human beings have failed to live up to God's intentions for us. God is the one who, time and again, keeps coming to us and giving us good gifts, the chief gift being God's promise to us: I will be your God and you will be my people. Blessing us eventually in Christ.

That's how it stands between us and God. That is the basis of our hope, in life, in death, in life beyond death. The same God who came to Abraham one night and promised, no matter what, to be his God, this same God promises not just to be the true and living God, but to be God for us. That's probably why, when Jesus was born, we were told to refer to him as Emmanuel, meaning "*God with us.*" God promising to be God for us, God with us, God keeping God's promises. God calling us by name.

Hearing our own name called out has its impact upon each of us. There is the tenderness of the whispered name; the joy of friends and loved ones reunited. There is even the sudden attention given when, in the mall or some other crowded place, someone calls out our name. We discover that they are calling to someone else who has the same name as we do. But, for that moment there is the turning of our head toward the sound and the good feeling we have when we think there is someone who knows us and wants our attention. Names are symbols of relationships.

Our names hold significance and bear evidence of our identity as persons and that is terribly important to us. Those who are deprived of hearing their own names are cast into alienation and crisis. Indeed, part of the deprivation of World War II concentration camps was that the tattooed numbers replaced the names of those who were incarcerated. No longer known by name, many lost the everyday reminder of who they were and for them that addition to an already terrible ordeal was enough to push them over the edge to total hopelessness.

Simon was to hear Jesus say that he would be Peter "*the rock*" and on it he would build the church. Saul, the persecutor of Christians, would receive a new name and be the missionary for the Christian church. And we could go on.

But, on this day of new beginnings, the day that would begin the story of the covenant of God with his people, God reveals a new name for himself to Abram. And then for Abram and Sarai, from whom he would create a faithful people, God bestows upon them the gift of a new name as well, WHICH WERE REALLY GIFTS OF PROMISE. God told Abraham and Sarah what he would give them children in their old age and though they lived years without seeing the fulfillment of that promise their names reminded them daily that they were people of a promise.

And so, you and I have become known as the people whose God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It began with a promise given in a name.

God had previously called the man Abram, meaning "*high father;*" and the woman Sarai, meaning "*princess.*" God had called them to leave behind all that they knew and venture out to a place God would show them. They went on the promise that God would be with them.

As God again establishes the covenant with Abram, God names the promise as himself: in Genesis 2:17, we read, "*I am God Almighty.*" The Hebrew for those words is El Shaddai. It means "*God of the mountains,*" God who is the mighty giver of life. It is God who gives life, and here God says that in the giving of

this name, El Shaddai, he will relate to Abram and Sarai in a new way; he will give them life. He will give them a new name. "*Abram*" shall become Abraham "father of a multitude;" and Sarai shall become "Sarah," "mother of princes and kings."

The good news of the Old Testament passage this morning is that God is a God who gives promises that can be trusted, even when we see no hope and no light at the end of our tunnels at the moment.

I had a telephone conversation with a woman who asked me, "*How do you keep believing when there is so much going in our world today?*"

My answer, when we have been so overcome with life and all that it throws upon us that we lose hope—there is the reminder of the promise contained in the new name that God gives us.

We take names for granted today and yet; our name becomes important to us for many different reasons. The name helps form who we are and gives us our sense of "*belongingness*" in this world. We know the tribe or people from which we have come by our name. How many of you this morning have taken time to do a search of your family to find out who you are, by knowing who your grandparents, their parents, and their parents were? The name that we bear brings with it an understanding of who we are and gives to us a promise as well.

I remember the story a woman who went through the process of adopting children. She related the story of the mountains of paperwork that had to be filled out. She said when the adoptions were final, the child's original birth certificate, in the state of South Carolina, was destroyed. A new one replaced it. The new birth certificate stated the name of the adoptive parents and the new name of the child. They adopted more than one child and found the process a little different each time they did it.

She said, as they entered the process, they liked to include the other children, who were already in the home, as much as possible. One daughter was an infant and had little to say about her name or anything else for that matter. However, in the case of the sons, when it came time for them to move from the status of foster child to adoptive child, they wanted to include them in the process of choosing their names. The younger son, she recalled, chose to retain his birth name as part of his new name.

Their oldest son's name, however, was a bit more complicated for various reasons. You see, for the first 7 years of his life, his name was Bobby. Even on the original birth certificate, his name was recorded as Bobby. She said they talked with him about changing his first name to Robert on the new birth certificate. They would still call him Bobby, but as he got older, he would have a first name with more flexibility built into it. He thought it was a great idea. And so, Bobby became Robert on his new birth certificate.

But, paperwork, as cumbersome as it may become, is a pale comparison to what transpires in the heart. You see, for Bobby, it was not enough to change his name on paper. Now "Bobby" wanted to be called "Robert." After nearly two years of calling their child Bobby, he actually expected—even demanded that everyone call him Robert! Why? Because the change in his name meant something very important to him. It was a PROMISE to him. By taking his new name he NAMED THE PROMISE—the promise of claiming membership in the family and of being a new person by virtue of that promise.

Furthermore, it was not enough that Robert would be definite about HIS name, and what he should be called, but he was very definite about what he would call others as well. He learned to read that same year: "*Dick, Jane, Spot*,"—do they still teach people to read that way today? I remember the "*Run, Dick, Run*." "*See Dick Run!*" books. But, in addition to Robert learning to read about Dick, Jane and Spot he also learned the word M-O-T-H-E-R. For a long time, he read, "*Mama*," when he saw those letters. Finally, he began to read, "Mother," correctly. It was shortly after that he also began to call his new mother "Mother."

Well, it is interesting that we all seem to have preferences about what children call us. This new mother of Robert did not care for "*Mother*" very much. "*Mother*" sounded to her like something an adult child would call his/her mother, and she wanted to enjoy all the moments and experiences of being with a child. She preferred "*Mom*" or "*Mama*" or even "*Mommy*;" anything but "Mother." As Robert adopted this pattern she would often say to him, "*Robert, please could you call me something different than Mother? I don't like it.*" He would always reply, "*I like calling you 'Mother' better than 'Mama.'*" She would ask, "Why."

“Why?” “I just do.” And it seemed very important to him.

She said she must have been a little slow in her thinking. The light finally dawned in her soul. Robert was stepping out onto a PROMISE yet again. By naming his new mother, he NAMED THE PROMISE. And he was inviting HER to step out onto that promise, too.

You see the truth is, Robert had more than one “Mama” in his young life. “Mama’s” had come and gone, too often for good reasons. One by one, they had disappeared from his life. For Robert, that adoption meant something significant: there would be no more “Mamas.” No more grabbing his suitcase to move to a new foster home. So, Robert needed a new name to call his new maternal figure. “Mama” would come and go; that had been his experience for years. But maybe, just maybe, a MOTHER would always be there. And so, for him, “Mother” is the name of that promise.

This is also true for Abraham and Sarah as God gave them a promise, and new names for the promise. Hear again these words of promise: *“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.”*

What about your name? Not just the name by which you are called, but the name contained in the promise of God to you. You do know, do you not, that you have been adopted into a family and have been given a new name, a name which is to us as much a promise as the name given to Abraham and Sarah?

In the first letter of Peter, you and I are reminded of who we are: *“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people....Once you were not a people; but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”*

You may recall that Paul, when writing to the church in Rome, tells a similar story to Robert and his MOTHER. Paul says God asks that we call him, “FATHER.” For that is surely who he is and that defines who we are—God’s sons and his daughters. This teaching of Paul carries with it the idea that the new relationship, of having been adopted by the FATHER, suggests a promise of a new and different kind of future.

This idea of adoption also carries in it the same combination of present and future tense—a promise to be claimed by faith. And because we are convinced of the new relationship offered to us by God we live confidently as his children.

There are some of us in worship today who are already convinced that a season like Lent is a tough time. We know we have sinned; we know we have failed God and others; however, we also know that we—like Abraham—can begin again based upon God’s promise to us. And my friends our new name, given to us by God, is that sign of God’s promise to us.

Let me conclude by reading to you a part of what Paul said to the Roman church in chapter 8: *Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?*

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

That is the promise of the name. See how much our names reveal!