***A COVENANT WITH A NAME CHANGE***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

February 25, 2024

Texts: Genesis 17:1-22 and Romans 4:13-25

 He is the one with whom it all begins, the one with whom God chose to establish a relationship and a covenant. Across the pages of Scripture, we don’t hear named “the God of Adam and Eve” or “the God of Noah” even though their stories precede the story of Abraham. The ancestral genealogies of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all trace their roots back to one enigmatic figure – Father Abraham and to one God, the God of Abraham. We, who call ourselves Covenant Presbyterian Church, cannot fully embrace that name without also embracing the significance of that covenant with Abraham, or more properly, with Abram.

 The relationship between God and Abram does not begin in the 17th chapter of Genesis that we read this morning. It starts earlier, back in chapter 12. It begins with an extraordinary encounter between 75 year-old Abram and God. Out of the mass of humanity God has created, God selects Abram (for no earthly reason), asks him to pull up his tent pegs and go to an unknown and unidentified place, and promises to bless him and make of him a great nation despite the fact that Abram has no children. In an irrational act of exemplary faith, Abram obeys and goes. Imagine, if you will, Sarah’s reaction to this encounter.

“We’re moving!” announces Abraham.

“Where to?” asks Sarah.

“I don’t really know yet,” says Abraham, “but pack up the tents, we’re moving out.”

“Why?” asks Sarah.

“Because our God told me to,” replies Abraham.

“Who is *our God*?” asks Sarah.

“The One who promises to be our God if we will go,” says Abraham.

“Really? An unknown god tells you to pick up and go, and you want to go? In which direction is *our God* telling us to go,” begs Sarah.

“I have no idea!” says Abraham. “But when we get there, it will be wonderful. It will be a great place for the kids.”

“What kids?” asks Sarah. “Do you know something I don’t know?”

And Abram just smiles a knowing smile and packs his bags.

Who would believe that the God of all creation would come and speak to Abram and make such glorious promises? Who would believe, until after the fact, until after the birth of the son? Who believed Noah until it started raining? No one would believe God had a plan for old Abram – perhaps not even Abram – until he went and did as God told him,

 and trusted as God asked him,

 and found the land God promised him.

Why did God choose Abram? God only knows, but God has a history of making unexpected choices – like Gideon, David, Mary, the disciples, and Abram. God chooses who God chooses, and rarely are they the most qualified candidates. If God can use them, flawed as they are, then perhaps God can use us, flawed as we are, too! Abram was not the obvious choice, but God chose Abram anyway.

 Why did he go? Scripture says it is because he had faith and trusted God. He believed, he obeyed, and he was blessed, for all that God promised quickly proved true with one exception: the promised son. Again and again, God promises Abram a multitude of descendants. Again and again, Sarai’s early pregnancy test comes back negative. So, Abram and Sarai begin to wonder whether the promise is true, whether God can be trusted. The sign of the promise is a son, but no son is appearing, and Abram and Sarai are not getting any younger.

 It is hard to wait for God sometimes, hard to wait for a prayer to be answered, hard to wait for a divine promise to be fulfilled. Israel had given up waiting for the Messiah when Jesus arrived! Most of us have given up waiting for Jesus’ return after two thousand years, and maybe like Abraham and Sarah, we wonder whether God can really be trusted to return, whether we’re waiting in vain for a promise that will never be fulfilled, whether we are just another Chicago Cubs fan in spring training, hesitant to get our hopes up for fear of having them dashed again and expecting yet another year of disappointment. Every week we pray, “Thy kingdom come,” but do you really expect the kingdom to come this week, in your lifetime, or in the lifetime of your children? How many promises has God made that you are still waiting to see fulfilled – for yourself or for your children yet unborn or for your grandchildren who are growing up right before your eyes? Perhaps we don’t fulfill our promises to God – but that is the topic for another sermon, another day. This is about God’s promises, the ones for which we wait not so patiently to be realized.

 Abram and Sarai got tired of waiting; they got tired of watching the years go by without a child’s arrival, they got tired of waking each day and wondering whether this might be the day in which God’s promise was fulfilled; they got tired of trusting in a God who was so good at giving directions, but seemed woefully inept at human reproduction. So they took matters into their own hands. With no in vitro fertilization option available (as in Alabama today) and consistent with the custom of the day, Sarai gave her maid Hagar to Abram to bear a son that would be considered Sarai’s own – a surrogate mother, if you will – and the plan worked. Ishmael was born to Hagar and Abram, but he wasn’t the son who had been promised. Abram begged God to make Ishmael that son, but God had another son in mind in due time, and Ishmael never satisfied the longing that Abram and Sarai felt. And so they waited a little longer.

 That is the way it goes when we take matters into our own hands. We think we know better than God; we think we can take bold action and do better than wait for God to act. We set aside the words of the 37th psalm:

 *Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will act…*

 *Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him.*

And we substitute for them words of our own making: *God helps those who help themselves*. In our microwave, 5G, fast-food generation we want a prompt response to God’s promises. We don’t want to waste time waiting. It is hard for the “just do it” Marthas to act like the “just be patient” Marys. Perhaps there is some purpose in divine waiting – some value in waiting patiently for God’s promise to be fulfilled, as God suggests. I am not implying that inertia and sloth are divinely approved qualities. I only wonder whether there is not divine value in waiting patiently, humbly, faithfully for God to act, instead of always trying to take matters into our own hands.

 All of which brings us back to this encounter in the 17th chapter of Genesis between God and 99 year-old Abram. Twenty-four years have passed since God first made the covenant with Abram, and for the umpteenth time, God comes and renews the promise:

 *I am God Almighty. I will make my covenant between me and you, and you will be the father of a multitude of nations. I am changing your name from Abram to Abraham, from ‘exalted ancestor’ to ‘ancestor of a multitude.’*

You have to wonder if Abraham’s response with his face planted in the dirt was, “Just when is that going to happen? I’m not getting any younger, you know!” Can you blame him for laughing in the face of God after twenty-four fruitless years? Can you blame him for asking that Ishmael receive God’s blessing before Abraham’s dim light burns all the way out? Can you blame Sarah for laughing, as Abraham did, when she overheard the same promise repeated by God’s messengers? Who can blame Abraham and Sarah for doubting the long-delayed promise of God, for that promise had long since lost its luster, its hope, its possibility. It is that hopelessness that sparks the laughter of Abraham and Sarah. It is God’s faithfulness that fulfills the promise in the birth of a son to old Sarah and even older Abraham. As God directed, they named their son Isaac which means “laughter”, though perhaps the laughter in his name is not that of Abraham or Sarah, but that of God, for God has the last laugh here.

 God keeps the promise to Abraham and makes of him a great nation that traces its roots back to Isaac and to old Abraham and to seemingly barren Sarah. Nothing is impossible for God, including the fulfillment of that impossible promise. Perhaps not as quickly as we would like, perhaps not in our time, but in God’s time God keeps God’s promises. It was the fulfillment of God’s promises that buoyed Abraham’s faith – a faith that burned brightly in the beginning as he folded up his tents and moved out, a faith that was virtually snuffed out in hopeless waiting for the sign of the promise to come, a faith that burned brightly once again in the end for all generations to see. Centuries later Paul would recall the whole encounter with God somewhat differently from the account in Genesis. As Paul recalls it:

*Hoping against hope, Abraham believed that he would become “the father of many nations,” according to what was said…He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old) or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what God promised.*

I wonder if Paul remembered those words in Genesis about Abraham laughing at the suggestion that Sarah would bear him a son. Did he not recall Abraham’s suggestion that Ishmael be the heir through whom the nations would trace their lineage? Perhaps not, or perhaps the faithful actions of Abraham simply trumped any signs of doubt that he had along the way. For in the end, despite his doubts, despite his laughter, Abraham became the ancestor of a multitude.

 That covenant was marked by a name change – Abram became Abraham, Sarai became Sarah – and it was marked too by a physical change. In fulfillment of his side of the covenant, Abraham and his descendants were circumcised – some might say “they had some skin in the game” – and thus was the sign of the covenant passed on from generation to generation to generation, ‘as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.’

 You are one of those stars, one of those grains of sand by the seashore, a branch that traces its roots to Abraham’s tree. His story is our story,

 our family story told again and again,

 a story of faith found and lost and found again,

 of doubts overcome,

 of hopes held and dashed and realized.

But most of all, his is the story of a covenant kept, of promises kept by the God who keeps all God’s promises, the God who promises to be our God. Circumcision was a sign of that promise; Isaac too was a sign of that promise.

 There is another son who is the sign of God’s promise for us, a son whose birth is proclaimed by angels in these words:

*To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord*!

His name is Jesus, which means “The Lord saves,” and that is God’s promise for you and for me in him; it is the covenant God keeps – the Lord, the God of Abraham and Sarah who is our God, is faithful and does indeed save! Amen