

“Defining the Relationship”

Scripture Text: Genesis 17:1-14

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Faith Presbyterian Church, Tacoma, WA

Rev. Nathaniel H. Gutiérrez

This morning, we will be taking a break from our series in Mark to return to a series I have preached from time to time called “Gleanings in Genesis.” This is a series that highlights certain passages throughout this foundational book of the Bible, and today we will be looking at chapter 17.

To set the passage in its context, you may remember that at 75 years of age, God called Abram to leave his father’s house and the land that he knew to follow God to the place he would show him.

God promised to bless Abram, and to make him the father of a great nation. He promised that like the stars of the sky, Abram would not be able to count the children God would bless him with. And in faith, Abram believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.

But almost 25 years had passed by, and Abram was 99 years old, and Sarah was past her child-bearing years, and they had no children. It *seemed* that God had forgotten them and his promise.

But then God appeared to Abram and repeated his covenant promises to him for a *third time*, adding the important act of the *covenant of circumcision*.

It is here where we pick up. Let’s turn now to Genesis 17.

Gen. 17:1 “When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, ‘I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, 2 that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.’

“3 Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, 4 ‘Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations.

“5 No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. 6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. 7 And 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. 8 And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.’

“9 And God said to Abraham, ‘As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations. 10 This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. 11 You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. 12 He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who

is not of your offspring, 13 both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. 14 Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

This is the word of the Lord. ***Thanks be to God.***

Let's pray together.

“Abram fell on his face.” Abram’s response to the God of the universe, the creator of the countless stars and galaxies, appearing to him in his majesty and power was to fall on his face.

It seems to me that that is the correct response to being visited by God.

But the question I would like to draw your attention to is *why*. Why would the Creator who made all things from nothing, who stands beyond time, who is all-powerful (omnipotent), and who is all-knowing (omniscient), come down to earth, and visit Abraham? This is not a normal everyday occurrence!

God in his great love is communicating something supernatural to Abram and to us, the future readers of this passage. See, this passage beautifully demonstrates that God has chosen a family, has separated that family as a people for himself and has chosen to redeem them for all eternity.

God has Chosen a Family

Did you know that you can now spit into a little vial and mail that sample off to a lab, where they can process your spit and through your DNA tell you part of your ancestry and who you are related to?

If they have the information in their database, companies like 23andMe and Ancestry.com will connect you with long-lost relatives and even famous people that you may be related to! Someone shared that in doing a test like this they found out they were very closely related to a professional athlete!

If these DNA tests had existed back in the New Testament, I think they would have made a killing, because everyone would have wanted to know if they could trace their ancestry back to Abraham, the “father of the faith.”

That is because God had a special relationship with Abraham and with his descendants. And we see that that relationship here in Genesis 17 is called a covenant.

The study of how God came into covenant relationships with people throughout Scripture is something that many pastors and theologians have focused on. Covenant theology is foundational to understanding the Bible and God. And alongside covenant theology we also see the theme of *election*.

Election has to do with God's choosing and ordaining all that comes to pass and choosing his own from before the foundation of the world.¹

Both election and covenant theology are themes that go hand in hand. Throughout the pages of the Old Testament Scripture, we see God entering into agreements with people he has chosen, called "covenants."

Now, if you are new to the idea of covenants, the word for covenant *in the original Hebrew, berith*, is used to define this special category of relationship. Linguists differ in their translations, and have used translations like "treaty," or "alliance," to describe this important word, but in each case, what is vital to note is that what they find in common is that the relationship... is binding and contractual. [Hollander, 124.]

As I've mentioned before from this pulpit, these covenant treaties are characteristic of historical treaties we might read of in history books of other ancient near eastern peoples. These treaties were between two parties: the powerful and the weaker. The powerful were the "Suzerain lords" and weaker were the "vassal servants." And those treaties were solemn contractual agreements, where the more *powerful dominant party* would make a treaty *with the weaker, vassal party* to protect and care for them as long as the vassal party would agree to the requirements and stipulations of the covenant and keep them faithfully. Additionally, these treaties carried significant consequences if either side of the party did not keep them. [Sailhamer, 130]

It appears that what God is doing here again with Abraham, is reaffirming his covenant relationship with him to be his Lord and for Abraham to be his vassal servant.² And it is easy to overlook this fact, but one important piece of this covenant treaty is that in Ancient Near Eastern treaties, it was often the servant or vassal who would approach the Lord or Suzerain for protection. But that isn't what we see here.

Here what we see is God, descending from the heavens, and appearing to Abraham, *seeking him out*, calling him to himself, and entering into this covenant treaty with him.

And while some well-meaning Christians believe in their hearts that *we take the first step toward our relationship with God*, it is apparent even in passages like these that this is not the case. For far from Abraham seeking God out, what we see is that God had chosen Abraham of his own perfect will.

To further make this case, it may be helpful to note that this passage follows on the heels of the text that outlines Abraham's unfaithfulness in waiting on God. Not only did Abraham not seek God, but he was also *actively rebelling* against God's promises by trying to have children

¹ Ephesians 1:4-5 "even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will...."

² Like other places in Scripture, the repetition of dreams or statements or prophecies seem to indicate surety of a promise. See also Genesis 41:32, John 21:15. The doubling of Pharaoh's dream indicating that God's plan was fixed, and he would shortly bring it about.

illegitimately. Despite his unfaithfulness, God chose him, and entered into a covenant treaty with him.

A Family

And God's grace continues to overflow. Not only did God chose a broken and doubting man like Abraham to make a covenant with, but he also made the covenant ***with his family that wasn't even born yet!*** God's purposes are far greater reaching than first imagined.

Now, people prepare sermons in different ways, but part of my process in sermon preparation is to write out the **entire sermon text**. Sometimes I write it on paper, but usually I write it out on whiteboards so that I can see the whole text before me. This causes me to slow down and really see the flow of the text. Next, I underline and circle themes that stand out and words, phrases or concepts that repeat.

And what jumped out of the text over and over in this passage was God telling Abraham, "And 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. Listen for it and look at the passage. "...You and to your offspring after you." "With you, and to your offspring after you" "with you, and your offspring after you." Repeatedly throughout only 14 verses, God is making it crystal clear that God is not covenanting with only individuals, but that he is also covenanting with the children and the children's children as well.

We see God's love for the little ones and families throughout Scripture and confirmed in the New Testament for example when Jesus says, "***let the little children come to me*** and do not hinder them, ***for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.***" [Matthew 19:14]

Look around at these covenant children here in this sanctuary. God has covenanted not only with adults but with children and with our children's children. It is no wonder the Psalmist exclaims,

Psa. 79:13 But we your people, the sheep of your pasture,
 will give thanks to you forever.
 from generation to generation, we will recount your praise.

Even before we were born, God had a plan for us.

See, God chooses and makes his covenant promise with Abraham and ***every*** male in his household. God does not limit the covenant promises to people who are born into the family (e.g.: blood relatives), but to all those that are in the household through a variety of different means, for example, adoption. For after all, all of us who are in Christ are adopted into the family!

Additionally, the covenant promises are not only for those who are intellectually or developmentally ***able*** to grasp what is going on in covenant. It is the whole household. No picking and choosing.

This is why ***we wouldn't hesitate*** and would ***certainly insist*** on welcoming a covenant child who has an intellectual or developmental disability into the covenant family. For God loves the little

children, he loves the adopted, and he loves those who are intellectually or developmentally disabled. And we see that clearly evidenced in that Abraham is commanded to circumcise all males – not just some – but all males, from 8 days old onward (far before anyone could potentially express their intellectual agreement with God).

So far from being merit-based or decision based, this act of God is *grace-based*. It is his choice, not ours. We never would have chosen him without his grace.

Our God is a God who not only chooses his own people, but he makes them his family. He cares about children, and he cares about the family.

And God not only cares about the family, but he also separates them for himself.

2. A People Separated for Himself

When Alicia and I were dating, it was wonderful. We spent time together and enjoyed each other's company until restaurants and coffee shops would kindly let us know that they had been closed for some time now and it was time to leave.

And as fun and enjoyable as that was, that was the most basic level of commitment we had. Once I had proposed (and she accepted), we moved to another level of commitment, communicating to each other and to the world around us that we were “off the market” because we were engaged to be married.

And then when we married, we became one family. She went from Alicia Skrivan and became Alicia Gutierrez. And our children were born with our last name, and became part of our family. Alicia took on a new identity, and signed up to be one with me, and I with her.

And in this text, we see something like this taking place in a far more important and glorious and eternal way.

First off, God is not indecisive in his relationship, but clear and makes his commitment to Abraham and his family known. God makes that covenant vow to Abraham to be his God. He promises to protect him, to provide for him and to redeem him eternally. And God makes that promise even more vivid by separating Abram to be his own. Abram is told, “No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.”

God also demonstrates his promise, by cutting a covenant. Back in Genesis 15, we noted that animals were sliced in half signifying the consequences of breaking the covenant. *Blood is shed*, demonstrating that whoever breaks the covenant will be cut off in the same way.

And in this chapter, God requires this of Abraham. He requires that Abraham enter into the covenant, and requires circumcision.

And far from a suggestion or a *helpful concept*, we read that **this** sign of the covenant, of circumcision, is a serious matter to God that must be fulfilled. Verse 10 reads,

“This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. 11 You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.”

God’s covenant was that every male among them should be circumcised. Every single male eight days old and older **had** to have the flesh of the foreskin cut off.

For God says, “so shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant.”

What is clear is that we know that there was no tolerance for disobedience in this matter. For in the following verse God clearly stated that, “Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has **broken** my covenant.”

Later on in Exodus we would be given a clear illustration that the Lord was serious about this when he nearly put Moses to death because he had forsaken this sign of the covenant.

Exodus 4:24 reads, “At a lodging place on the way the LORD met him [speaking of Moses] and sought to put him to death. 25 Then Zipporah [Moses’ wife] took a flint and cut off her son’s foreskin and touched Moses’ feet with it and said, ‘Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!’ 26 So he let him alone. It was then that she said, ‘A bridegroom of blood,’ because of the circumcision.”

One writer explains what is happening in a covenant this way: “A covenant molds and maintains the identity of those who live within it— both the original mediators of the covenant and their descendants. Abrams very name is changed (Gen 17:1-8), and his people are circumcised— a commitment of the heart as well as of the skin.” [Hollander, 124.]

See, not only is it a question of God choosing and separating a people for himself, but it was also God’s creating a new identity for the people of God.

In the same way that marriage and adoption change us in a very specific way, so entering into the covenant ushers us into a new identity as the people of God.

If you were to drive through the Andes Mountains, you would see llamas along the mountainsides with a tuft of very colorful knotted threads hanging from their ears. Rather than branding llamas, these colorful tassels help their owners identify which llamas belong to them, and which ones don’t.

In a similar way, circumcision sets apart, through a sign in the flesh, who belong to God’s people and who do not. It was not for God, but for his people. Circumcision announced that the Israelites belonged only to this community and only to this God. Like an engagement, the people of God were separated for a relationship with God alone along with all the covenant blessings. [Brueggemann, 155]

The covenant sign offered Israelites the gift of hope and the reality of identity. [Brueggemann, 154]

Circumcision and Baptism

And that is why circumcision is so important to Christians, because it gives us greater understanding of the foundations of our practice of baptism. For the New Testament links the old practice of circumcision with the new practice of baptism, demonstrating that circumcision pointed forward to the cutting off of Christ Jesus. For as Paul explains that in Jesus also...

Col 2:11-13

“...you were circumcised with a circumcision ***made without hands***, by putting off the body of the flesh, ***by the circumcision of Christ***, 12 having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. 13 And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses.”

And when Peter called the crowd at Pentecost to repent and be baptized, he said in Acts 2:39

“For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.””

Do you hear the same language as in Genesis 17 (“to you and to your children and for all who are far off”)?

And all of this matters to us because circumcision was the sign of the covenant that God gave his people, beginning with Abraham, to set apart his people from others and to make a people his own.

And as God promised, he would never abandon the covenant. But in Christ, the sign changes.

For in Jesus’ coming, we see a widening in the scope. When Jesus sends his disciples out into the world to be his witness, he sends them not to *Israelites* alone, but to all the nations. And their discipleship no longer requires circumcision, but *baptism*:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, ***baptizing*** them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” [Matthew 28:19-20a]

In Galatians, Paul elaborates this idea, noting that not only has the expansion of the gospel gone to all the nations, now the sign of the covenant is for all sorts of people, for we are one in Christ. The new sign of the covenant is for men and women, Jew, and Greek!

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither *Jew nor Greek*, there is *neither slave nor free*, there is *no male and female*, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise. [Gal 3:27-29]

In saying that through baptism we have put on Christ, and that those of us who are in Christ are Abraham's offspring and heirs of the covenant promises, it becomes evident that this is the continuation of Genesis 17 covenant promise and fulfillment.

There is little argument that the Abrahamic covenant sign of circumcision continues through baptism. And that being the case, it is no wonder that baptism was one of the first steps in Paul's conversation.

In fact, when Paul retold his conversion story in Acts 22, he explained that Ananias asked him what he was waiting for. He said, "And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name."

For Ananias, the covenant sign was not to be delayed. The covenant sign needs to be administered to all of God's people.

And that is why we baptize our covenant infants. For as with circumcision, even at eight days of age, the covenant sign was administered to all in the covenant household. None were to be excluded. This covenant sign was so important to God, that in v. 14 of our passage, God left no ambiguity: any who were not covered by the covenant sign were to be cut off from God's people for they have "broken my covenant."

It is no wonder the Westminster Confession of Faith considers it *a great sin* to *neglect* the ordinance of baptism. [WCF 28:5]

Covenant membership and church membership

See, while membership in the covenant people of God is not a requirement for salvation (we may think of the thief on the cross) at the same time, it does not mean that it becomes an optional aspect of our faith and walk with God. For thousands of years, the people of God have been circumcised and later baptized, telling the world that we belong to God and are engaged to be his. This is simply what believers are called to do.

But there is another aspect to this. Not only do we enter the covenant membership with God, but another step in our faith is also to enter the membership of a church.

Throughout my time at college, I witnessed four years of what people call "church hopping" or "church shopping." Students, including myself, would not settle down in one church, but would go from church to church.

But loner Christians are not something you see in the Scriptures. It goes against the entire passage we see here. See, people belonged to the "people of God." And today the "people of God" is the church. The people of God are not rogue agents, drifting around the world on their own. Instead, we see throughout the NT local churches being established with elders, deacons, and ministers of the gospel. We see churches with their own budgets. We see the body working together as one, for the good of the body. We also see Paul writing the church to excommunicate those who are living in horrific sexual sins, and to remove them from their fellowship. [1 Corinthians 5:2]

The only way you can remove someone from your fellowship is if there is a church with leaders in it. Paul says, “For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those *inside the church* whom you are to judge? 13 God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person *from among you.*” [1 Corinthians 5:12-13]

Paul was writing to the *specific* church in Corinth, which gathered together as the people of God. Among those who gathered, there was one who lived in sin, and he was to be cast out of those who held their membership in their church.

Paul refers to specific members in specific churches elsewhere as well. In Romans 16:5 he sends greetings: “Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia.” The first convert, Epaenetus, belonged to the church in that met in Prisca and Aquila home. He did not roam, he belonged to the church. Paul expected him to be there.³

So, while membership is downplayed in many churches, we can see that throughout the pages of Scripture, membership in the covenant is the expectation. And if membership in the covenant is expected with God, that must take place in a church with ordained ministers. And that church should be where you submit yourself to the leadership God has given you, and where you tithe and where you give of your gifts and talents and are disciplined and built up in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Membership in the church is an important step in the believer’s life, for it goes hand in hand with our baptism and our baptism vows. For in baptism, we promise to suppose the church in its worship and work, and to submit ourselves to the government and discipline of the church and promise to promote its purity and peace.

If you have already been baptized, you were baptized with a church body, with expectations. And if you are no longer at the church you were baptized in and you have been here more than a few months, then this is your new church. Part of your walk with God means being a real part of the church body. It means that you commit yourself to us, and we commit ourselves to you. We formalize the relationship.

When I was younger, I remember learning about this thing called a DTR. A DTR, also known as “Defining the Relationship,” is what a couple who had been seeing each other for a while would have when they were ready to have “the talk” about their relationship. With a DTR, you went from being friends to becoming committed to each other as boyfriend and girlfriend.

And when it comes to your baptism and to your membership, I want to encourage you to see the joy that taking that next step will bring for your life and the life of the church and your relationship with God.

See, to become circumcised (now baptized) means that you were entering into the covenant family of God. It means that you are entering into an exclusive relationship with God. You are his and he is yours. There is tremendous security there. For along with the benefit of that relationship come

³ See 1 Cor 16:19, 2 Cor 1:1, Col 4:15, Philemon 2 for additional examples.

all the blessings of God as protector and provider, not only for your specific needs and desires, but for the desires and needs of your children and your children's children in an everlasting covenant.

And in becoming part of the people of God, who you are is changed. You become one with the body of Christ. You declare that you are a child of God for all the world to see. For baptism is a sign and seal of the washing away of your sins, your union with Christ, your regeneration by his Holy Spirit, and your engagement to be the Lord's. So, you should shout it from the roof tops, that you are his and he is yours!

And what is more, and if you don't take away anything else today, I hope you take this away. That covenant relationship is not dependent on you. While we participate, make no mistake that we participate because God has chosen us to participate. And not only that, but God has secured our participation for all eternity, not because of anything we have done, but because that covenant is made in the blood of Jesus Christ and is therefore irrevocable. Permanent. Irreversible, fixed, binding and final.

Brothers and sisters, nothing can separate us from the family of God when we are ingrafted into Christ Jesus. And for this we praise God, from whom this blessing flows.

Application

So, what is next? As Ananias said to Paul, what are you waiting for?!

Friends, those of you who have put off being baptized, or have put off baptizing your children, or becoming a member, ***do not delay any longer!*** Make an appointment with the pastors or elders to be baptized, and/or to become a member. If you are curious about membership, but you have questions, come talk to me, or one of the other pastors or elders. We'd love to help answer any uncertainties or confusions you may have about what membership entails.

If, for example, you think membership is about you becoming quizzed on theology and knowing all the right answers, please know that that is not what our membership is about. The primary thing our elders are looking for is if you have an actual faith in Jesus. If you think you can't become a member because you believe X, Y or Z, come, and talk to us, you may be surprised to know that becoming a member does not mean you must be aligned with all of our theological persuasions.

Additionally, delight in your baptism. Remember that with your union with Christ, your regeneration by his Holy Spirit, and your engagement to be the Lord's, you are seeing the sign and seal of your ingrafting into Christ and partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace, and our engagement to be the Lord's. [Westminster Shorter Catechism 94.]

In Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, our Triune God who sits in the heavenly places, and whose footstool is the earth, came to us and chose us to be his. He chose us to be heirs of the promises given to Abraham. Not because of anything within us, not because of our spiritual inclinations, or our intellectual or mental capabilities. He came to us to establish a covenant relationship to be our God and we, his people. And in so doing, he provides us with an everlasting covenant that reaches beyond space and time and secures for us eternal life in Him. Therefore, do not tarry, but seize the gift God has given his people, and embrace your identity in Jesus, forever. Amen.

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