

Sunday January 5, 2020
Lesson 6: God's Covenant With Abram
Scripture: Genesis 15: 1-21

Context:

Unit 2 of the Adult Bible Studies shifts from the theme of hope to covenant to journey through the entire biblical story. Just as hope is a pervasive theme, so is covenant in the story of God and humanity. The study will look at how God has made a covenant with ancient people and how that continues to play out today.

The first account of covenant comes from the book of Genesis. Abram (Abraham) is a patriarch of the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim traditions. Today we will look at the event that made Abraham central to the tenets of Christianity and how God's covenant with him still plays out today.

Chapter fifteen of Genesis is one of the most important chapters in the book. Many scholars conclude that this is the oldest statement of Abrahamic faith, from which the others are derivatives.¹ Abraham moves from hearing God's fundamental promise to protesting and concludes with acceptance. Both God and Abraham are given a voice, which helps to understand the complexity of the relationship between God and humanity.

The text begins with God approaching Abraham to say not to fear and to hear of the promise God will give him. Abraham protests by reminding God that he has no heirs to receive the land or whatever God may give him. God counters the protest by asking Abraham to look at the stars to see his descendants and then promises to give Abraham a heir.

Yet to seal the deal and affirm Abraham's righteousness, God invites Abraham to present animal sacrifices. In the midst of the strange ritual, Abraham must drive away birds of prey. At sunset, Abraham falls asleep and there is a strange darkness. God speaks into the darkness and makes promises that do not sound reassuring.

God warns Abraham that his descendants will become slaves at a certain time in their history. Yet the nation that enslaves them will be punished and they will come out of the land with the possessions of their oppressors. Abraham will not have to face these things as he will die in old age and be buried with his ancestors.

The scene culminates with the carcasses being visited by a smoking firepot with a blazing torch coming through the pieces. We do not hear if they are consumed or if the torch simply goes past them. Then a summary is given of what has taken place in this exchange. Abraham receives a covenant and God makes the promise to give the land to the descendants of Abraham. Even though there are various groups named in the text who already occupy the land, the true owners are those who belong to Abraham. God has made this a covenant promise of land, tying it to Abraham who places trust in God.² The rest of Genesis will explore how Abraham learns to trust God and ask questions of the covenant.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, "Genesis," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2010), 140.

² *Ibid.*, 150.

Application

How do you picture the word “covenant”? Most of us might conjure up the image of a wedding ceremony. For both religious and secular people, this is probably what draws us closest to a ceremony in which formalized covenant vows take place. The traditions may vary across the world, but there is the element in which words with meaning are used and something that seems to transcend time takes place.

In this covenant we are seen that humans are given something for their response in a covenant. For Abraham it is a promise tied with land with the caveat that he will not see the end result of his covenant. He is invited to join in faith that the covenant will be fulfilled and honored. Even when he is dead, God will carry on the covenant with his descendants.

Covenant can come across as a foreign concept today. In a world that is increasingly mobile and people are used to instant gratification, it could be easy to dismiss covenant as something irrelevant or obsolete in how we do life today. Why make a promise when you do not know or understand the end results?

This scene shows us the beauty of covenant. As God reaches out to Abraham, we see the mystery and awe of such an event. God does not coerce or force Abraham to commit to the covenant. In fact, he warns Abraham of all the pitfalls that will come along. A covenant does not mean that things shall be easy or that the promises will bring about comfort or security. If anything, a covenant makes things riskier because one’s whole life is wrapped up in a promise and words that are meant to hold great weight.

To a degree, our society struggles with the concept of covenant because it transcends something beyond our control. A covenant is a promise made in which two parties are bound and intertwined with one another. A contract allows for one party to leave if the fulfillment is not met. Yet a covenant moves beyond that tit for tat stipulation and engages the parties to go beyond such a transaction. It demands time, energy, patience, and endurance to be in a covenant.

It is one of the reasons I do not think we can ever stop reminding each other of the importance of covenant. For a marriage, one cannot just jump down the aisle and focus on the prettiness of the ceremony. There is work that comes in a marriage.

The same goes for a covenant of clergy and laity in the church. In the United Methodist Church, clergy make a covenant with God and the church to go where they are sent and live into their calling. The Bishop and other elders and deacons make a covenant to support them. The laity affirm their calling and make a covenant to serve in ministry beside them. Yet that takes work for all parties to be faithful to God and the church.

You may be able to think of other covenants that are important to you. If you are in a covenant group, you know the importance of confidentiality and also accountability. You know the importance of meeting with each other and holding one another in your thoughts and prayers. And you covenant to stay with each other even when you live miles apart.

Take a moment to reflect on the covenants in your life. How do you nurture those covenants? What do you do when you feel that covenants are not being respected or honored? How do you feel that God wants to be in covenant with you? What do you think is countercultural about covenant?

Rev. E. Hunter Pugh
Pastor of Brantley – Brunson Chapel Charge
PO Box 71
Brantley, AL 36009