

“Everlasting Covenant”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Second Sunday of Lent - March 1, 2015

Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-17

What sort of promises do we make in our lives? If we are married, we promise to love and cherish our spouse till death do us part. If we are employed, we promise through an employment contract to do our work to the best of our abilities. If a friend asks for our help, we promise on our word to aid them as best we can. Promises can come in written form, spoken form, and through our actions.

In legal situations, we often have to sign our name to a document, which is our promise to either tell the truth or to honor an agreement we have made. I remember when I finally paid off my educational loan from Davidson College, I was sent in the mail the documents I had signed my junior and senior year to take out my Perkins Student Loan. The phrase, “I promise,” appeared on many occasions throughout the documents. Beside each of these “promises” were my initials, showing my comprehension of what I promised to do. We all have similar experiences with mortgages, car loans, or other indebtedness that we take on: we make a promise to repay the loan according to an agreed upon schedule.

Do we make a promise, though, when we become a Christian? We don’t sign a written contract as members of the church. We may answer in the affirmative questions the minister asks at the time of becoming a member, but we don’t carry that around with us. How would we respond if in the mail one day, we received a letter asking us how we have fulfilled our promise to be a faithful Christian? Would we answer with satisfaction that we have lived a life worthy of the promise God has made to us in Jesus Christ? Or would we answer with hesitation or uncertainty?

“Covenant” is a word we don’t use as frequently in our modern-day vernacular. It’s a word often relegated to homeowner’s associations and what you are allowed or not allowed to do to your property. However, in the Christian and biblical context, “covenant” is an incredibly important and meaningful word. It imparts a sense of trust, of presence, of connection to one another that is first and foremost established by God alone. It is a promise that God makes to his children throughout the Old Testament, and is ultimately fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is an eternal covenant which, no matter what we do, can never be broken, because God has chosen to love us, his children, in immeasurable ways.

Last Sunday, I preached at Westside Garden Plaza for their vesper service, and I chose the story of Noah as our text. In that story earlier in the book of Genesis, God makes his first covenant with humanity, with Noah and his descendants. “I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth” (9:10-11). Noah doesn’t have a say in this covenant, but neither is he called to fulfill it with any further acts of faith or promises of his own. It is God’s own doing, and the bow in the clouds is God’s reminder that he will never again destroy the earth through the waters of the flood.

Now, fast-forward eight chapters, and we come to our story today. This is not the first covenant promised to Abraham and Sarah; earlier in chapter 15, God promises land to Abraham and his descendants (15:18). However, the covenant which the Lord makes with Abraham and Sarah now is not about land, but about hope and life. “I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous . . . This is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations” (17:2,4). On four occasions in the span of six verses, the term “covenant” is used, reinforcing the importance of this promise God is making to Abraham and Sarah.

And if that is not enough, this everlasting covenant is further marked by God giving each of them new names. “No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham . . . As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name” (17:5,15). I am drawn to the correlation we often make when we celebrate baptism in the church. When the waters of baptism wash over us, we are born anew into the covenant of God’s grace. We will ask, “What name is given this child?” and in baptism we are grafted into this eternal covenant of God.

The promise made – “I will make you exceedingly numerous” – the changing of names, not to mention the apparent absurdity of the promise – two people in their nineties becoming parents – all of this points to the radical hope God provides. “The covenant offers the people of Israel the gift of hope, their source of identity, and their place in the creation . . . The covenant between God and Abraham is a reflection of God’s relationship with all of Israel, and through Israel to the church, and through the church to each one of us . . . The covenant is an eternal promise God makes; God and Abraham will no longer be alone” (Craig Kocher, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2008: 52).

It is through this eternal promise that we are made heirs of the covenant – through Abraham and Sarah, through Isaac and Jacob, through Solomon and David, through Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord. The promise God has made to us is not based on legal contracts or human emotions. This promise of God is based on God’s Word,

God's choice, God's desire to never be alone. It is an eternal covenant made to our ancestors before us, and for our descendants who will come after us. It is a promise of blessing by God our Creator, of forgiveness by God our Redeemer, and of everlasting presence by God our Sustainer.

How will we respond to this eternal covenant the Lord has made to us, his children? It can be tempting to take this covenant for granted, and live our lives not recognizing the depth of God's love for us in Jesus Christ. We witness this in the choices we make, the priorities we set, the belief that the church will always be there for us, no matter how little we offer in return.

What would it look like if our lives reflected every day the depth of our knowledge of this eternal covenant? Instead of making excuses why we could not help a neighbor with a simple task, we think first of our sister or brother in need. Instead of ignoring an invitation to help with a particular task at church, we think first of how that is an opportunity to serve in the name of the one who came to serve us. Instead of viewing the world with eyes of desperation, hopelessness, and negativity, we think first of how God will never break his promises to his children, and how we are a small yet integral part of his eternal covenant.

To live as faithful disciples in this way, we must first and foremost trust. Trust that God will never abandon us, even in the most challenging times. Trust that God is present and active in our midst - through our relationships, through the community of faith, through strangers we have never met. Trust in the Lord God Almighty, who will always and forever be our God.

May our lives of discipleship reflect our trust in the eternal covenant we have with the Lord our God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.