

Lent 2, 2012

Last week, in the first of this sermon series on Covenant, we encountered Noah on the receiving end of a promise and a sign from God that never again would God seek to wipe out all creatures from the face of the earth. At the time I noted that in this version of Covenant, everything came from God as a gift, and it seems that nothing was being required in return. It was, in theological terms, an act of pure grace.

This week we move from Noah to Abraham and Sarah, and to another covenant. Once again there is a promise and a sign. Once again, with the snippet of reading set by the lectionary, it seems that everything is coming from God with nothing being asked in return. But actually, this time the sign of fruitfulness from God is to be matched by another sign to be enacted by the human agent. Were we to read the passage in its entirety, instead of skipping forward to Sarai becoming Sarah, we would see that this second sign is to be one of conformity and obedience – it is the sign of circumcision. There is thus a transactional element to the Abrahamic covenant that was not present in the covenant with Noah. It seems, then, that we are in a new covenantal space – a space of reciprocity, of negotiation even, as God offers Abraham greatness, land and posterity in exchange for a bodily mark.

But before briefly considering the issue of circumcision – and I think we have to do so in order properly to understand this passage – let's look in detail at the promises made by God.

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 And [*therefore, ergo*] I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.'

The promise of increase is there right from the start and is, we soon discover, at the heart of this covenant promise. And it is a promise in two part – the first part with Abraham directly, the second with him and his offspring.

³Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, ⁴'As for me, this is my covenant with you:

A

a) You shall be the ancestor of *a multitude of nations*.

b) ⁵No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of *a multitude of nations*.

c) ⁶I will make you *exceedingly fruitful*; and I will make *nations of you*, and kings shall come from you.

B

d) ⁷I 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.

e) ⁸And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a *perpetual* holding; and I will be their God.'

The first promise is all about increase – Abram's name is to be increased to Abraham, fruitfulness will not just be numerical – and this to a man thus far with only one son – but also authoritative – nations and kings. This is not just “your grandchildren shall be many”, this is “your grandchildren will rule.”

The second promise, including Abraham's offspring, is in some ways less ambitious – it is a promise of land; a specific parcel of land, which is to be God's perpetual gift.

Both aspects of this covenant promise are summed up in the final line of verse eight – “I will be their God.” This is, I believe, the ultimate point of all this. It is establishing firmly the idea that God has chosen Abraham and his family to be his, and he theirs. To use a phrase from another place – Abraham's offspring are to have no Gods but this God Almighty.

Which brings us to the issue of what Abraham is to do in response.

Circumcision was not unknown in the ancient world before Judaism, but it gradually came to be associated very specifically with the Jewish people and, in exile, would have been a very specific physical sign distinguishing captives from captors – at least the males.

That what God requires from Abraham is a bodily mark – and that on the part of the male body most associated with reproduction – is perhaps not surprising. Marking our bodies is one way humans have always acted to show relationship. The wearing of a ring in marriage is one remnant of that idea. And this covenant, remember, is all about fruitfulness. The sign Abraham is to perform is, in effect, a sign by which God says both to Abraham and to his offspring “all that you produce is mine”.

And this is the point. Just as God's promises under the covenant end with “I will be their God”, so circumcision is in effect the corollary of that, saying “We will be your people”. It is a sign, a mark, that the fruitfulness of this people is special, defined, and God-given.

What, then, does this mean for today? Well, for modern day Jews this covenant promise is alive and well, and if you want to understand the strength

of feeling about the conflict over land in Israel and Palestine, then you need look no further than verse eight that I just read.

But what about for modern day Christians? Long ago the church decided that male circumcision was not to be required for church membership, because in Christ, God's promise has been extended beyond the confines of Abraham's descendants to all people. What, then, does this covenant mean for us?

I think, three things – and these are points I leave with you to ponder.

First, fruitfulness comes from God. And by that I mean not just the promise of children and descendants, but everything that is abundant in the world. In this aspect, the covenant promise is, like that with Noah, renewing of an aspect of creation. God wants us to thrive. What that might mean in a world of overpopulation and over-productivity is, however, a whole other sermon.

Second, "I will be their God." The idea that God will chose a people is one that defines Israel, but it is also present in Christianity. The difference, of course, is that the choice is widened to include all people. Since Christ's day, the church has been expanding and expanding its understanding of just how numerous are the people whom God has chosen. "I will be your God" is a promise made, I would want to argue, to everyone. Which bring us to point three:

"We will be his people." We males might no longer be circumcised, but if we might describe Abraham's actions as his saying "yes" to God, then we can certainly reduce the idea that our response to the universal offer to be God's people need also at the very least to be a "yes". I am not one of those who believes that absolutely everyone is in the same type of relationship with God and that it doesn't really matter what you believe or how you act. I am, however, firmly of the belief that the offer of the promise is universal, and that our response of "yes", whenever it comes, and however it is defined, is enough. That "yes" need no longer be the bodily mark of Abraham's covenant sign. But it remains, I think, the small thing that God requires.

God's promise to Abraham and his offspring, then, may be a sign for us today – that we too are called into a relationship of fruitfulness and reciprocity. A relationship where God offers all, and we need only say yes. As we continue over coming weeks to explore this Old Testament notion of covenant we will move into places of yet greater nuance. But already, two covenants in, we can see clearly that the idea is most of all an idea about God's love, and his care for all his people.